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*Matthew Holter †*

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# DENYING GOD: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC AND CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHICAL AND SCRIPTURAL APPROACHES TO APOSTASY AND MARTYRDOM

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding Islamic and Christian beliefs and early historical struggles with apostasy, “a kind of disbelief” manifested through action or deed, and martyrdom ameliorates religious discourse between the faiths.<sup>1</sup> Jesuit theologian and progenitor of contemporary Comparative Theology Francis Xavier Clooney celebrated detailed “learning from one or more faith traditions” because the discipline solidifies ecumenical concords across religious boundaries.<sup>2</sup> Clooney opined that Comparative Theology transcends anodyne interreligious observations. Instead, Comparative Theology “is a theological discipline confident about the possibility of being intelligently faithful to tradition even while seeking fresh understanding outside that tradition.”<sup>3</sup> Clooney’s emphasis on interreligious

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† This is where you can put the author’s attributions.

1. Juan Eduardo Campo, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (New York: Facts on File, 2009), 48.
2. Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 13.
3. Ibid.

## HOLTER: DENYING GOD

dialogue derived, undoubtedly, from the landmark papal encyclical *Nostra Aetate*. The Vatican II conciliar document marked a turning point in Church history, recognizing that other faiths “reflect a ray of...[t]ruth which enlightens all.”<sup>4</sup> *Nostra Aetate* references Islam’s similitudes with Christianity, although recognizing past “quarrels and hostilities” between the two faiths.<sup>5</sup> Alongside some doctrinal similarities, both Islam and Christianity overcame persecutions during their respective nascent years. However, despite these persecutions, both faiths increased their followings, attracting the marginalized, downtrodden, and destitute.

Accordingly, Islam and Christianity codified analogous teachings on martyrdom and apostasy but differed on apostates’ culpability if their “heart contradicts” their tongue or deed.<sup>6</sup> Although Islam distinguishes between the internal intent and external action of apostasy, this distinction does not compromise the faith’s sincerity because of the religion’s early martyrs and Scriptural expositions about retaining Muslim piety during upheavals.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, despite these perpetual misunderstandings and differences, historical and Scriptural developments influenced Islam and Christianity’s compatible teachings on apostasy. During the two faiths’ respective inceptions in the first and seventh centuries, systemic religious and governmental forces tortured adherents, aiming to ossify the opposing teachings’ disseminations. Islamic and Christian historiographies and Scriptures paint brutal, ungarnished scenes of men and women dying for their religions. Moreover, illustrious early Islamic and Christian leaders apostatized because of covert and overt pressures. Appreciating Islam and Christianity’s shared early obstacles with persecution strengthens religious solidarity, granting both faiths’ adherents a mutual understanding of the other’s history and theology. Although the religions differ on the irreverence of apostasy when undergoing torture, Islam and Christianity’s early hardships spurred salient theological commonalities on apostasy and martyrdom. Specifically, both faith traditions’ early historiographies and Scriptures’ disapprobation of apostasy reveal a mutual commonality evident

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4. Pope Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated October 28, 1965, section 2, accessed September 5, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

5. Ibid., section 3.

6. E.J. Brill, *The First Encyclopedia of Islam*, vol. III, edited by M. Th. Houtsma, A.J. Wensinck, H.A.R. Gibb, W. Heffening, and E. Levi-Provençal (Leiden: BRILL, 1993), 628.

7. *A Shi'ite Encyclopedia* (Ahlulbayt Islamic project, 2014), 899.



in both religions. A comprehensive analysis of Islamic and Christian historiographical and Scriptural approaches to apostasy and martyrdom evinces both faiths 'shared early hardships and religious earnestness.

### **A. Islamic Historical and Scriptural Positions on Apostasy and Suffering**

Primary and secondary *siras* (Muhammad biography) describe the acute trials and persecutions of the inchoate Islamic community, the *Ummah*.<sup>8</sup> Persecutions began soon after the Islamic Prophet Muhammad's revelations in circa 610. Islam's soteriological universality appealed to the destitute and societal outcasts. Consequently, fearing the erosion of its political and religious authority, the Quraysh, the dominant pagan mercantile tribe tasked with maintaining order in Mecca, persecuted vulnerable Muslims such as Bilal Ibn Rabah and Sumayyah bint Khabbat, knowing their vulnerability and hoping they would apostatize. Contemptuous Quraysh leader Abu Jahl spearheaded the early persecutions against the unprotected *Ummah*, hoping "to seduce them [the Muslims] from their religion."<sup>9</sup> Medieval Islamic exegete and historian Ibn Kathir inveighed against Abu Jahl's turpitude, maintaining that he imperiously imposed cruel tortures to get the Muslims to "do whatever their persecutors incited."<sup>10</sup> Although "[s]ome gave way [and recanted] under [the] pressure of persecution," many societal outcasts, viewed with contempt and disdain by the pre-Islamic world, remained steadfast, resolutely professing the oneness of God (*Taqwa*) despite torture.<sup>11</sup>

Religious scholars know frustratingly little about Sumayyah's life before her conversion and eventual martyrdom. Islamic traditionalist Muhammad al-Bukhari's canonical ninth-century Hadith Sahih al-Bukari highlights Sumayyah's destitution: "My [Muhammad's Companion Ammar Ibn Yasir's] mother and I were among the weak and oppressed. I from among the children, and my mother from among the women."<sup>12</sup>

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8. Cyril Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 539.

9. Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1967), 143.

10. Ibn Kathir, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad*, vol. I., trans. Professor Trevor Le Gassick (United Kingdom: Garnett Publishing, 1998), 359.

11. Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, 143.

12. Sahih al-Bukari II. 23. 439.

Prominent ninth-century Muslim theologian Muhammed al-Tabari described her origins and family dynamics in his landmark *History: Biographies of the Prophets and their Successors*. Al-Tabari explained, “[A] slave girl named Sumayyah Khabbat... [married Amir] Yasir, and she bore him ‘Ammar.... [Amir] Yasir and ‘Ammar stayed with Abu Hudhayfah until he died. Then God brought Islam... and [Amir] Yasir, Sumayyah, [and] Ammar... adhered to it.”<sup>13</sup> Al-Tabari’s laconicism speaks volumes about Sumayyah and her devotion to Islam. Despite being an Abyssinian slave and, in the words of erudite early-ninth-century Muslim scholar Muhammad Ibn Sa’d, “a very old and frail woman,” Sumayyah ultimately found freedom in Islam.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, however, Sumayyah’s violent death epitomized the apotheosis of that freedom.

Sumayyah’s torture narrative elicits potent images of femininity, piety, and resolve. Sumayyah endured the horrors of being tortured, pressured to apostatize under duress, alongside her family and other “weak and unprotected converts.”<sup>15</sup> Primary *siras* referred to Sumayyah simply as Ammar Ibn Yasir’s decrepit mother. Ninth century-historian Ibn Hisham’s *sira* noted that the Quraysh “used to take Ammar Ibn Yasir out along with his father [Amir] and mother [Sumayyah], who had all embraced Islam, in the heat of the day and make them lie on the burning sand of Makkah.”<sup>16</sup> Despite being “exposed, in the glaze of the mid-day sun, upon the scorching gravel of the [Meccan] valley,” and suffering from “intolerable thirst,” Sumayyah “escaped the shame of renunciation,” refusing to apostatize.<sup>17</sup> Obviating “the shame of apostasy” prompted Abu Jahl to murder Sumayyah “by shooting her in the vagina with a spear” because he regarded her fortitude as intransigent defiance.<sup>18</sup> Dying in such a vivid manner alongside

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13. Muhammed al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 39 *Biographies of the Prophets and their Successors*, trans. Ella Landau-Tasseron (Albany, New York: New York Press), 29.

14. Muhammad Ibn Sa’d, *The Women of Madina*, vol. 8., trans. Aishia Bewley (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 1995; reprint), 186.

15. Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Rochester Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2006), 82; Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammed*, 143-144.

16. Ibn Hisham, *Biography of the Prophet*, trans. Inas A. Farid (Cairo, Egypt: Al-Falah Foundation, 2000), 55; Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammed*, 145.

17. William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet from Original Sources* (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1878), 73.

18. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Provisions Of The Afterlife Which Lie Within Prophetic Guidance*, trans. Ismail Abdus Salaam (Lebanon: Dar Al-Kotob Al-Ilmiyah, 2010), 268.

her husband and child evinced the Quraysh's extreme antipathy toward the incipient Islamic sect. However, due to her fortitude, Islam commemorates Sumayyah as "the first martyr (*shahidah*) to meet her death in Islam."<sup>19</sup>

Islam also venerates an African slave named Bilal Ibn Rabah for his refusal to abjure Islam during torture, a tangible testimony of Muhammad's radical commitment to egalitarianism. Bilal's origins resembled Sumayyah's. Ibn Sa'd noted that before Bilal's eventual manumission, he was a slave, "his mother was Hamama... [, and] was one of the first of the Abyssinians."<sup>20</sup> Because of his lower-class status, the Quraysh victimized Bilal and one day ordered "a huge boulder to be placed on his chest."<sup>21</sup> Al Tabari detailed how the Quraysh tempted Bilal by saying, "' You will stay like this [suffocating under the boulder] until you leave the faith of Muhammed.'"<sup>22</sup> However, despite undergoing torture, Bilal reaffirmed his belief in the oneness of God, impervious about "what was done to him for the sake of Allah."<sup>23</sup> Bilal's courage personified the indomitable ethos of the persecuted Islamic sect, for he, like other victims, possessed an ardent love of God that superseded the perennial fear of death. Before the Quraysh could kill him, however, Muhammad's affluent father-in-law Abu Bakr manumitted Bilal.<sup>24</sup> Despite Muhammad's connections, however, not every victim could be emancipated, spared from having to either publicly profane Islam or undergo torture.<sup>25</sup>

Muhammad encountered society's obloquy and mollified various victims' disquietudes, imbued with compassion and "ensuring them that God would bring this matter [i.e., the tortures] to an end."<sup>26</sup> Muhammad held martyrs in high regard, professing that they "shall be pardoned every

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19. Kathir, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammed*, 358; Muhammad 'Ali Qutb, *The Women Around the Messenger* trans. Imam Abdur-Rafi Adewale (International Islamic Printing House), 13.

20. Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *The Companions of Badr*, vol. II, trans. Aishia Bewley (London: Ta-Ha Publishers, 2013), 177.

21. Muhammed al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 7 *The Foundation of the Community* (Albany, New York: New York Press, 1987), 59.

22. Ibid.

23. Musnad Ahmad Ibn Hanbal 3.3832.

24. Kathir, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammed*, 357.

25. Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani, *Fath al Bari* 1. 3.

26. Kathir, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammed*, 360.

27. Hazrat Mirza Bashir Ahmad, *The Life & Character of the Seal of Prophets*, vol. 1., trans. Ayyāz Maḥmūd Khān (United Kingdom: Islam International Publications, 2011), 226.

fault but debt.”<sup>27</sup> During the persecutions, Muhammad consoled apostates and other victims, exuding commiseration and encouraging them “to dissemble in order that they might escape torment.”<sup>28</sup> However, when the persecutions intensified, and when the Prophet saw “the affliction of his companions,” concrete exhortations replaced Muhammad’s oral pacifications. Muhammad encouraged his followers to seek refuge under Negus, a religious tolerant Christian Abyssinian king who would eradicate all fears of apostasy. Although Muhammad’s uncle Abu Talib provided him with physical protection, after the unprotected Muslims’ first exile to Abyssinia, the Quraysh verbally profaned the Prophet, accusing “him of sorcery, soothsaying, and madness.”<sup>29</sup> After Abu Talib’s death, slanders dissolved into physical threats against Muhammad, and the Quraysh went to “greater lengths in molesting him than they had ever done during his lifetime.”<sup>30</sup> “Suppress[ing] his hurt,” Muhammad fled to Medina (*Hegira*), proselytized the Islamic faith, acquired a large following, and victoriously led the Muslims against the Quraysh during the seminal Battle of Badr (ca. 624). Badr forever changed Islam’s position from a persecuted sect to a powerful geopolitical player, but the persecutions of Islam’s nascent years were codified in the Koran, Islam’s sacred text, subsequently inspiring myriad Muslim theologians.<sup>31</sup>

Islamic Scriptural teachings on suffering and apostasy proceeded from historical developments. Islam holds that God (*Allah*) revealed chapter (*surah*) 29 of the Koran, entitled *The Spider (Al-Ankabut)*, during the Meccan persecution of Muslims. *The Spider* details past Prophets’ persecutions and rejections. Overcoming evils, trials, tortures, and slanders, while challenging, during the Meccan persecution aligned with God’s

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28. Abdullah Al-Mamum Al-Suhrawardy, ed. *The Sayings of Muhammad* (Lahore, Pakistan: Zareen Art Press, 1905), 426.

29. Muir, *The Life of Mahomet from Original Sources*, 73.

31. Islamic Publishing House, 1998), 146; Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 7; Ahmad Balādhurī, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, trans. Philip Khuri Hitti (New York: AMS Press, 1916), pp.15-44.

31. Islamic Publishing House, 1998), 146; Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 7; Ahmad Balādhurī, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, trans. Philip Khuri Hitti (New York: AMS Press, 1916), pp.15-44.

31. Islamic Publishing House, 1998), 146; Kecia Ali, *The Lives of Muhammad* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 7; Ahmad Balādhurī, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, trans. Philip Khuri Hitti (New York: AMS Press, 1916), pp.15-44.

omniscient prescience. After all, God is “the All-Hearing, All-Knowing” creator of the universe.<sup>32</sup> Individuals, polities, and nations can deprive Muslims of their material happiness and even kill them. However, struggling for the faith accentuates Muslim piety, guiding them towards God’s ineffable benevolence.

Numerous Islamic scholars used their theological erudition to exegete Koranic teachings on suffering. A 2018 exegetical (*Tafsir*) commentary explicates the underlying theme of *The Spider*: “Mere lip-profession of faith,” the text explains, “is not enough. Individuals and communities have to go through... fire and tribulations to achieve their ends. The greater and harder the sacrifice, the more glorious and enduring the success.”<sup>33</sup> Enduring hardships and refusing to apostatize validated Islam’s theological appeal because many Muslims proved their unfeigned faith and died before recanting. *The Spider* also invokes past Prophets’ rejection in the material, provisional world. However, despite these obstacles, the Koran reassures Muslims that “God ... [will] never wrong them.”<sup>34</sup>

Renowned Muslim exegetes propounded God’s support of the Muslims during the Meccan persecution. Eleventh-century Koranic scholar Imam al-Wahidi lambasted feigned believers “who declared [the Islamic faith] with their tongues... [but] when Allah tested them with trials or calamities regarding their own persons [Prophets], they succumbed.”<sup>35</sup> Al-Wahidi’s commentary demonstrates that, while not sinful when the heart contradicts the tongue, casting aspersions about the sacred, Prophets, God, [and] engaging in idolatry, even during duress, inadequately reflects Muslim piety. It was important for the Muslims suffering from systemic persecutions from 610-622 to remember that God “tested those who were before [them]... [and] knoweth those who feign.”<sup>36</sup> For the Muslim, internal piety trumps physical wellbeing, and whoever “is true to Allah,” preeminent twelfth-century Muslim theologian Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali contended,

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32. Sura 29: 4.

33. Hadrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, *The Holy Quran with English Translation and Commentary*, vol.4 (Pakistan: Islam International Publications, 1960), 2029 (Surah 29:4 commentary).

34. Sura 29: 39.

35. Alī ibn Ahmad al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 125.

36. Abdullāh Ibn 'Abbās, *Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'an*, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Amman, Jordan: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007), 449.

“will be delivered... and secure from apostasy.”<sup>37</sup> The profundity of these Koranic commentaries about suffering and deliverance from apostasy transcend the historical circumstances of seventh-century Arabia. Instead, the invitation to submit to God’s will continues to be a hermeneutic that applies to Muslims in various locations and eras.

Islam continues to ruminate about how the perennial issues of suffering and apostasy apply to contemporary Muslims. “Life is a test,” twentieth-century Islamic cleric Mohammed al-Ghazali noted, “a trial, which we all have to undergo. Once we pass from this life into the next we will find out how we have fared and whether we have passed the test or not.”<sup>38</sup> Whether these tests manifest in momentous matters or benign ones, orienting one’s life towards God comprises a Muslim’s principal task on earth. Being compelled to recant one’s deepest-held religious beliefs via torture represents the apogee of trials, for piety is not some abstract notion but a living testament that forms a person’s identity. Koranic expressions about standing by one’s religious convictions testify to that aphorism, informing and guiding Muslims encountering earthly hardships. Christianity’s fraught origins mirrored Islam’s. Moreover, like Islam, Christianity codified profound Scriptural expositions on suffering and apostasy in the Gospels, granting early Church adherents a model for prioritizing and conducting both their interior and exterior lives.

## **B. Christian Historical and Scriptural Positions on Apostasy**

Christianity’s first-century obstacles with apostasy and martyrdom authenticated the faith’s legitimacy. Although Christianity’s historical origin’s validity pales compared to Islam’s, most scholars agree about the relative authenticity of Christ’s death and the Christian sect’s subsequent persecution because of the embarrassment criteria. Christian scholars define the embarrassment criteria as those “embarrassing... tradition[s] of the church” included in the canonical Gospels.<sup>39</sup> Including the crucifixion of its founder illustrates the uniqueness of Christianity, for Jesus entered the

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37. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, trans. Muhammad Mahdi Al-Sharif ( Dar Al Kotob Al Ilmiyah, 2010), 50.

38. Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali, *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur’an*, trans. Ashur A. Shamis (Herdon, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000), 425.

39. Christopher McMahon, *Reading the Gospels: Biblical Interpretation in the Catholic Tradition* (Washington, D.C.: Anselm Academic, 2012), 49.

world not to achieve temporal power but to deify humans, “assimilating... [them]... to the invisible Father [i.e., God).”<sup>40</sup> Like Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia, Jesus encountered disdain, hate, and public rejection. Gospel explications about dying and encountering first-century society’s antipathy not only exemplify Christianity’s distinctive theological sympathies for the marginalized; they comforted the early Church during various systematic persecutions. Palestine’s religious authorities and the Roman government martyred Christianity’s founders, just as the Quraysh killed, tortured, and casted aspersions on Muslims. Like Islam, these hardships effectuated analogous Scriptural and exegetical teachings about the follies of apostasy and prioritizing exterior material happiness over an interior love of God.

Christ’s teachings about “suffering for the sake of righteousness” antedated His death.<sup>41</sup> Despite envisioning his death, the Gospels depict Christ as prioritizing God over all material goods, including finances, family relations, and even the His followers’ lives. “Whosoever shall confess me before men,” Christ said, “[to] him will I also confess before my Father which is in heaven.”<sup>42</sup> Like the Koran, the Gospels teach that loving God entails a two-way relationship between humans and the divine. Speaking on divine-anthropomorphic relations, Jesus chided an inquiring disciple, saying, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”<sup>43</sup> Famous fifth-century Church Father, exegete, and theologian St Jerome compared being in a state of sin to death. Remaining in a sinful state and withdrawing from God, according to St. Jerome, is tantamount to death, for if one shows “solicitous...[concern for] the dead [while not amending their sinful state], ...[they] too may be called dead.”<sup>44</sup> As Islamic scholars interpreted Koranic teachings on martyrdom to lead one to a purer love of God, patristic commentaries, also, understood Christ’s words to elucidate the importance of loving God, even over dead loved ones.

Christianity’s distinctiveness rests in Christ’s willingness to die for the remission of sins. While the Islamic tradition produced numerous hagiographical historiographies detailing Muhammad’s victimization in Mecca, the Christian Scriptures hold Christ’s Passion as one of its definitive

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40. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 16.2.

41. 1 Peter 3:14.

42. Matthew 10:32.

43. Matthew 8:22.

44. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 103.

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theological teachings. God, in the person of Christ, became man to deify humans. Moreover, God, in the person of Christ, understood humans' sufferings, their rejections, and their humiliations, dying on the cross atop Mount Cavalry. Christ experienced ignominy, exposed to an angry mob after His flogging. St. Augustine, the esteemed fourth-century Bishop of Hippo and famous Church Father, described the scene, sparing no detail but candidly detailing Christ's despondency. He wrote: "[H]e has been scourged, crowned with thorns, clothed with the garments of derision, jeered at with the bitterest insults, struck with the open hand; his ignominy is at the boiling point."<sup>45</sup> The Roman civil authorities proceeded to crucify Christ. However, following His death, the Apostles, Jesus' followers, propagated the nascent faith, adamantly believing that Christ overcame death, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, persecutions continued after Jesus' death. Subsequently, the Palestinian religious authorities and the mighty Roman Empire martyred Christians like Stephen and Peter for refusing to acquiesce to the first-century's prevailing animosity towards the faith.

Stephen's death typified early Christians' ardent piety and docility. Christianity's Scriptures and hagiographies credit Stephen, an early first-century Jewish Christian, as being the first Church martyr. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the temple religious authorities of first-century Palestine, and the Roman civil authorities viewed the early Christian sect as both novel and dangerous. Therefore, various religious leaders and political authorities sought to extirpate the faith by killing its adherents. As Islamic historiographies venerated Sumayyah for being the first Islamic martyr, early Christian exegetes commended Stephen as the first Christian martyr who died for his unfailing religious convictions. After he gave a loquacious, telling oration about the Pharisees' acute hypocrisy, the religious authorities stoned Stephen. Despite being stoned, fourth-century theologian St. John Chrysostom posited, Stephen refused to comprise his faith, confessing and preaching "even in death."<sup>47</sup> Stephen ultimately found freedom in Christ, and that freedom, like Sumayyah's in Islam, culminated in his death.

St. Peter, an early influential apostolic evangelist, transitioned from a timid disciple to a redeemed devoted martyr, emulating his Teacher's

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45. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 116.4.

46. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins & the Question of God* (Minneapolis Minnesota: Kingdom: Fortress Press, 2003), 636.

47. John Chrysostom, *The Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, Homily XVIII.



passion. Before his martyrdom in Rome, Peter expiated for apostatizing and denying knowing Christ three times during Jesus' trial before the temple guards, proclaiming to Christ three times that he loved him.<sup>48</sup> After his apostasy, according to the Gospels, Christ accepted Peter's contrition. However, Jesus ominously foreshadowed that, because of Peter's reversion, "when you [i.e., Peter] grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go."<sup>49</sup> Being imbibed with an ardent love of God conquers the "permanently natural" fear of death, St. Augustine explained. Moreover, Christ's consolation inculcated "a desire for eternal life... [that transcended] the grievousness of death."<sup>50</sup> Although not recorded in the Sacred Scriptures, primary Christian hagiographies chronicled Peter's migration to Rome, proselytization of the faith, and death. Famous second-century church historian Tertullian wrote that Peter "endure[d] a passion like his Lord's [crucifixion]."<sup>51</sup> First-century Pope Clement of Rome reinforced that assessment. Clement noted, "Peter, through unjust envy, endured not one or two but many labours, and at last, having delivered his testimony, departed unto the place of glory due to him."<sup>52</sup> Peter, alongside other prominent apostolic leaders, met an unpropitious end, but contemporary and subsequent Christians felt vindicated in these struggles, reassuring the faithful that "[p]ersecution does not diminish but increase[s] the [strength of the] church."<sup>53</sup>

Persecutions continued for centuries, and Christ's teachings in the canonical Gospels and His early disciples and apostles' martyrdoms induced the Church's absolute prohibition of apostasy. "Whoever denies me before others," Jesus said, "I will deny before my heavenly Father."<sup>54</sup> The apostolic martyrs of the early Church knew the importance of this precept.

48. John 18:18-27; John 21:15-18.

49. John 21:15-18.

50. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 123.5.

51. Tertullian, Chapter XXXVI, "The Apostolic Churches the Voice of the Apostles. Let the Heretics Examine Their Apostolic Claims, in Each Case, Indisputable. The Church of Rome Doubly Apostolic; Its Early Eminence and Excellence. Heresy, as Perverting the Truth, is Connected There with," in *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325: ANTE- Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3. ed. Alan Menzies (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM B. Eerdmans Publishing Company).

52. Clement of Rome, "First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians," 5.4.

53. Leo the Great, *Sermon* 82.6.

54. Matthew 10:33.

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Abandoning and forsaking Christianity would have spared their lives. However, denying Christ assaults the integrity of a Christian's identity and interior conscience, desecrating the belief in the sanctity of the person that governs every believer's motive, thought, and deed.<sup>55</sup> Undoubtedly, the Islamic-Christian tradition agrees that loving God supersedes all other tenets. However, during the Church's institutionalization at the Nicene Council (325), an ecumenical meeting convoked to end Church disunity, the council's framers prohibited the justification of apostasy under any circumstances, imposing penalties for ecclesial and lay apostates.<sup>56</sup> Whereas Christians adopted an absolutist position on the sinfulness of apostasy at Nicene, refusing to justify the action based on a strict interpretation of the Gospels, Islamic scholars, conversely, embraced a consequentialist approach to abjuration, inspired by Koranic teachings, Hadiths, and *siras*.

### **C. Differences: Comparing Islam's Internal Intent Classification and Christianity's Absolutism**

Muhammad exhorted his followers to apostatize without compunction because the heart, not the tongue, determines a believer's piety. The Quraysh's tortures engendered many apostasies. "If they [Muslims during torture] were asked, 'Are al-Lat and al-Uzza [pagan deities] gods in their own right other than God?' they would reply, 'Yes; they are.'"<sup>57</sup> Muslims apostatized "just to avoid torture."<sup>58</sup> Muhammad's companion Khabbab ibn al-Aratt decried the Muslims' sufferings. However, Muhammad responded that prior believers in God "used to be combed with iron combs so that nothing of his flesh, or nerves would remain on his bones; yet that would never make him desert his religion."<sup>59</sup> Although Muhammad prioritized retaining piety during torture, obliquely chiding Khabbab for forgetting pious believers' past torments, he ensured fellow Muslims that God

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55. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, "The Confession of Agapius: In the Fourth Year of the Persecution of our Days," in *History of the Martyrs in Palestine*, trans. from ancient Syriac by Dr. William Cureton (London: Williams and Norgate, 1861).

56. Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Second Series*, vol. 14 (New York: Christian literature company, 1900), 24, Canon X, XI.

57. Kathir, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammed*, 359.

58. Ibid.

59. Sahih al-Bukari 5.63. 3852.

disregarded their apostasies “because of the contempt and extreme pain they suffered.”<sup>60</sup> Despite the faith’s early tension with internal intent and external action, Islam’s efficacious nuanced approach to public renunciation ensured that “only five converts returned to paganism.”<sup>61</sup>

Sumayyah’s son and companion of the Prophet Muhammad Ammar Ibn Yasir’s apostasy predominantly produced Islam’s tension between internal intent and external action. Contemporary Muslim historian Sadruddin Sharafuddin al-Amili’s biography of Yasir explained that Ammar, despite witnessing the horrors of his parents’ murders, “remained steadfast and firm in his faith.”<sup>62</sup> Despite the admission that Ammar’s faith “remained steadfast,” Islamic historiographies unanimously concurred that Ammar, as well as other persecuted Muslims, calumniated Muhammad and Islam. “The idolaters took Yasir and did not leave him until he had maligned the Messenger of Allah and spoke well of their [pagan] gods,” Muhammad Ibn Sa’d wrote.<sup>63</sup> Yasir felt remorse for defiling the Messenger of Allah, the person whom he valued above everybody and who formed his identity. “By Allah,” Yasir confided, “I did not leave [the scene of the torture] until I maligned you and mentioned their gods well.”<sup>64</sup> Muhammad, however, assuaged Yasir because his heart remained steadfast and contradicted his tongue during his abjuration, reassuring him that God disregarded these invectives because Yasir uttered them during duress. Moreover, Muhammad encouraged Yasir to repeat the blasphemies if the Quraysh resumed their tortures.<sup>65</sup> Yasir’s concealment of his faith precipitated a commonly misunderstood Islamic precept known as *Taqiya*: the concealment of internal piety during upheavals.

Islam, inspired by Yasir’s predicament, instituted the theological doctrine of *Taqiya* in the Koran, attempting to protect Muslims from harm. Yasir’s renunciation of Islam influenced the Koran’s conditional exception to apostasy. The Koran explains, “Whoever renounces faith in God after having believed—except for someone who is compelled, while his heart rests securely in faith—but whoever willingly opens up his heart to

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60. Kathir, *The Life of the Prophet Muhammed*, 359.

61. Rev. Canon Sell, *The Life of Muhammad* (London: The Christian Literature Society, 1913), 49.

62. Sadruddin Sharafuddin al-Amili, *Amir Ibn Yasir (ra)- A Companion of the Prophet* (Islamic Seminary Publications, 2014), 44.

63. Sa’d, *The Companions of Badr*, 191.

64. Ibid., 191; Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammed*, 145.

65. Sa’d, *The Companions of Badr*, 191.

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disbelief—upon them falls wrath from God.”<sup>66</sup> This verse does not constitute relativism. Contrarily, Muhammad preferred martyrdom to the shame of renunciation, and the Koran warns that apostates face God’s wrath.<sup>67</sup> According to Ibn Abbas, an acclaimed seventh-century exegete and uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, Surah 16:106 castigates “whosoever utters words of disbelief willingly.” However, the verity of proper worship did not apply to “the person who is coerced into disbelief.”<sup>68</sup> Undoubtedly, the Islamic Scriptures, Hadiths, and historiographies express aversion to apostasy and preferred martyrdom. Nevertheless, unlike Christianity, Islam adduced the Koran to formulate a conditional approach to apostasy, permitting believers to ostensibly cede the faith while internally remaining pious.

*Taqiya* appeals to consequentialism. Allegations that Ammar renounced his faith stupefied Muhammad. “‘Never [would Ammar apostatize],’” Muhammad exclaimed. “‘Ammar is filled with faith from his head to his toes.’”<sup>69</sup> Despite knowing Ammar recanted externally, Muhammad did not consider Ammar’s actions sinful because he retained his internal piety. Muhammad and Islamic Sacred Scriptures never permitted apostasy. However, publicly profaning God, Muhammad, or the sacred does not constitute apostasy when extenuating circumstances threaten a believer’s life or property.<sup>70</sup> “[I]f anyone is compelled and professes unbelief with his tongue, while his heart contradicts him, in order to escape his enemies,” Al-Tabari argued, “no blame falls on him.” Moreover, Al-Tabari proceeded to explain the internal and external facets of piety: “Belief is expressed by heart, tongue, and hand.... Observance of the heart is absolutely necessary. But if it is probable that... an injury will befall him, his property or one of his co-regionalists, then he is released from the obligation to intercede for the faith with [the] hand or tongue.”<sup>71</sup> Whereas Islam extricates Muslims from the duty to profess their faith in God if doing so induces harm, Christianity holds that both a Christian’s internal intent and external action composes a desideratum that bounds a believer’s grace.

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66. Surah 16:106.

67. Ibid.; Sahih al-Bukari, 5.3852.

68. Abbas, *Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur’an*, 296.

69. Alī ibn Ahmad al-Wāhidī, *Asbāb al-Nuzū*, 102.

70. *A Shi’ite Encyclopedia*, (Reference 8 al-Sirah al-Halabiyyah, v3, p61), pp.903-904.

71. Brill, *The First Encyclopedia of Islam*, 628.

Gospel elucidations told the persecuted inchoate Church about the harmonious relationship between the interior and exterior. Peter's denial of Christ correlates with Ammar Ibn Yasir's denial of Muhammad, as both regretted their actions. However, Peter expiated for his apostasy. Church Fathers refused to justify Peter's denial because "[a] prudent reader knows how frivolous the interpretation is."<sup>72</sup> Peter, like Yasir, experienced acute shame for apostatizing. After his denial, Peter fled the chief priest Caiaphas' courtyard, ashamed of his actions. Patristic commentaries about the episode conveyed less sympathy towards Peter than Islam did towards Ammar Ibn Yasir. After Peter's apostasy, St. Jerome wrote, "[H]e could not do penance. So he goes outside from the council of the impious in order to wash away the filth of a cowardly denial with bitter weeping."<sup>73</sup> Tears flowed from the faces of Yasir and Peter. However, whereas Muhammad commanded Yasir to repeat calumnious invectives if his heart contradicted his words, Church Fathers lambasted Peter's "cowardly denial" because the exterior and interior are mutually compatible.<sup>74</sup>

Early Church clerics embraced these exegetical Gospel commentaries to apostates who succumbed to prevailing pressures that compromised a believer's proper religious expression. While systemic persecutions manifested in various ways, a similar motif included an unjust pressure on Christians' freedom to exercise their religious beliefs. Canonized third-century Saint Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria described the moral dilemma Christians faced during the third-century Decian persecution. He wrote:

Summoned by name they approached the unclean, unholy sacrifices. Some came white-faced and trembling, as if they were not going to sacrifice but to be sacrificed themselves as victims to the idols, so that the large crowd of spectators heaped scorn upon them and it was obvious that they were utter cowards, afraid to die and afraid to sacrifice.<sup>75</sup>

Labeling apostates as "cowards" for fearing death corresponds with Christianity's animus towards believers such as Peter who abjured because of various pressures. The decisive Nicene Council (325) espoused the

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72. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 307.

73. Ibid., 308.

74. Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, 308; Augustine, *The Harmony Of The Gospels* (Germany: Jazzybee Verlag, 2012), 263. The quotation comes from Jerome.

75. Eusebius, *History of the Church* 6.41 (London: Penguin, 1989), 212.

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absolute prohibition against public apostasy and promulgated that “when they [ecclesial apostates] are discovered [to have apostatized,] they shall be deposed” and “[lay apostates] shall be dealt with mercifully... if they heartily repent.”<sup>76</sup> The institutional Church showed mercy towards Christians that heartbreakingly immolated animals and recanted, although they had to expiate to revert to the Church. However, inspired by Scripture and tradition, at the Nicene Council, the Church upheld the objective categorical principle of worshiping God publicly, proscribing apostasy regardless of any ends that recanting may produce—even the preservation of one’s sensible life.

However, claiming that Islam employs *Taqiya* merely as a geopolitical tool to acquire material power while Christianity’s absolutist position transcends anthropomorphic amendments fails to account for the Church’s employment of consequentialism in other arenas. Islam would also maintain that it completely prohibits apostasy. However, denying God during torture does not constitute apostasy. Hence, if external pressures threaten Muslims’ livelihoods, God does not require expiation, since no sin has been committed. Although Christianity differs from Islam on apostasy in this regard, not accounting for an apostate’s competing internal intent, the faith employs consequentialist reasoning on other weighty issues. Consider renowned thirteenth-century Dominican theologian and scholastic Thomas Aquinas’ justification for killing in his distinguished disquisition *The Summa Theologica*. The Church, according to Aquinas, always condemns murder, considering it “the gravest of the... sins that are committed against one’s neighbor.”<sup>77</sup> However, Aquinas distinguished between killing and murder, permitting the former when a “public authority... [acts]... for the common good.”<sup>78</sup> Orthodox Christianity’s utilization of consequentialism in grave moral matters accounts for the greater good. Hence, embracing Thomistic consequentialism helps Christians understand the Islamic approach to public apostasy better. Ultimately, both faiths put conditional parameters on identifying intrinsically wrong actions, prioritize submission to God as paramount, and both religions extol martyrdom as the paradigm of religious fidelity.

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76. Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. XIV., 24, Canon X, XI.

77. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, “On Murder,” 64.6.

78. *Ibid.*, 64.3.

## Conclusion

Religious intolerance assailed both the Islamic and Christian faiths, yet both faiths' adherents died for the respective religions and felt intense shame for apostatizing. Clooney's insistence on strengthening interreligious relations not only helps people from different faith traditions respect another's similar dogmas and histories; it reinforces other faiths' sincerity. When analyzing Islam and Christianity's shared struggles with persecution and apostasy, it becomes evident that both religions' adherents did not privatize their respective faiths, considering it a vital component that established their identity and prepared them for life after death. Ultimately, people do not die for empirical things. Conversely, people die for religions and political ideologies, beliefs that the naked eye cannot measure. In various environments of religious bigotry, individuals and polities cling to tribalistic impulses. However, those tribalistic impulses regress inevitably into religious prejudice, the same prejudice that blighted Islam and Christianity during their respective nascent years. Both Muslims and Christians, followers of the world's two largest religions, share a joint religious sincerity that helps believers conquer the vicissitudes of temporal life. Despite the faiths' differences on internal intent versus external action, both religions admonish apostasy, regarding the action to impinge divine-human relations. Islamic and Christian commonalties on apostasy and martyrdom exemplify the solace of religion, a solace evident in both faith traditions.

## QUIRK: STEPPING INTO THE BATHHOUSE

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## STEPPING INTO THE BATHHOUSE: PHYSICAL SPACE AND SHINTO REVIVAL IN MIYAZAKI'S SPIRITED AWAY

### INTRODUCTION

In 2003, Hayao Miyazaki's animated feature *Spirited Away* (originally released in Japan in 2001 as "Sen and Chihiro's Spiriting Away") won the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature. To this day, it is the only non-English film to be given the accolade, and in subsequent years it has only grown in acclaim. Despite its popularity in the West, *Spirited Away* is a distinctly Japanese film, heavily featuring traditional architecture and customs as well as foregrounding Shinto imagery and ideals in its plot. In an interview for *The Art of Miyazaki's "Spirited Away,"* Miyazaki confirmed his intentions to headline these traditional concepts. He stated, "Surrounded by high technology and its flimsy devices, children are more and more losing their roots. We must inform them of the richness of our traditions."<sup>1</sup> His comments reflect that, despite popular representations of classical Japanese culture such as *Spirited Away*, Japan has become more and more secularised since the mid-twentieth century, and younger generations are increasingly growing up without knowledge of traditional Japanese customs, especially those of Shinto. This decline is in part due to the growing inaccessibility of physical Shinto spaces in modern Japan, a

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† This is where you can put the author's attributions.

<sup>1</sup> Alvin Lu, ed., *The Art of Miyazaki's Spirited Away*, trans. Yuji Oniki (Hong Kong: Tokuma Shoten Co., Ltd., 2001), 16.

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phenomenon that is reflected in the representation of Shinto as surrounded by modernity in *Spirited Away*.

This paper analyses the construction of physical space in Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, particularly utilising Henri Lefebvre's theory of the aspects of social space, to contextualise this film in the broader marginalisation of Shinto in contemporary Japan. The protagonist, Chihiro, begins the film as the product of a modernity without access to Shinto. Through supernatural access to Shinto social space, she learns and embodies its ideologies, ultimately acting as a suggestion for the restoration of Shinto in contemporary Japan. Using an interpretation of Lefebvre's three aspects of social space, this paper will map Chihiro's transformation and the subsequent reflection of her new Shinto embodiment back onto the bathhouse. This will first require an overview of the film and its construction of physical space, followed by an explanation of how the methodology was assembled to best approach this film. I will also provide background for secularisation in Japan before ultimately incorporating these elements into an in-depth discussion of *Spirited Away*'s discourse of representation. This paper presents a view of Shinto that focuses on its essential properties in order to contextualise the tradition within a media representation.

### The Spaces of *Spirited Away*

*Spirited Away* follows a prepubescent girl, Chihiro, who, with her parents, is in the process of moving to a new town. During their drive to the new house, they encounter *torii* gate<sup>2</sup> in the middle of a forested area. Despite Chihiro's vocal hesitations, her parents enter and discover what they assume to be an abandoned theme park; their exploration quickly leads them to a seemingly deserted banquet. As her parents begin to eat, Chihiro wanders off to find an ornate bathhouse. A mysterious boy notices her and urges her to leave before the rapidly descending darkness falls. She runs through the park to find her parents, but upon arriving back at the banquet she finds only two pigs wearing her parents' clothes and gorging themselves on food. Panicked, Chihiro attempts to leave, but is stopped by a previously non-

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<sup>2</sup> *Torii* gates are a traditional Shinto structure that mark the beginning of an especially awe-inspiring site. *Torii* are not a designation of separation; rather, they connect specific manifestations to the holistic presence of Shinto in the rest of the world.

existent river blocking the exit and a ferry full of *kami* spirits<sup>3</sup> travelling to the bathhouse. Eventually she is found by the boy she met earlier, who smuggles her into the bathhouse and gives her directions to acquire a job in the facility to secure her safety. The matriarch of the bathhouse, Yubaba, agrees to give Chihiro a job, but only upon taking her name from her, leaving her only with the syllable “Sen”.<sup>4</sup> Chihiro—now Sen—must grapple with life in the bathhouse amongst spirits while simultaneously attempting to find a way to turn her parents back into humans.

When considering space in *Spirited Away*, the most prominent site of the film is the bathhouse. It is the dream-like place in which the majority of the action takes place, at once housing Chihiro and constantly presenting her with unfamiliar and often horrifying *kami* who stay there to replenish their spirits. It allows her to rest and mature, but also serves as her prison. The use of a bathhouse as the main setting is poignant to Japanese culture; bathing is key in preparing to enter shrines, and the act of cleansing itself allows for a pure *kokoro*,<sup>5</sup> giving the individual greater access to Shinto ideals in their interactions with the world.<sup>6</sup> The *sentō*, or bathhouse, was once a key aspect in communities, but they have fallen out of fashion as more people have moved to crowded cities.<sup>7</sup>

While the film’s bathhouse evokes a *sentō* in concept, its appearance is in fact an amalgamation of several types of architecture both from Japan and outside. It captures elements of design from both the Meiji and Tokugawa periods, as well incorporating signifiers of Chinese restaurants and “touches of the grotesque visions of Peter Brughel and Hieronymous Bosch.”<sup>8</sup> This edifice of the *kami* blends international influences alongside

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<sup>3</sup> *Kami* refers to both the general powers of Shinto that exist throughout the world, and the particular embodiment of that power into supernatural beings. The latter is also referred to as *yokai*.

<sup>4</sup> “Sen” is an alternative reading of the 千 character in Chihiro’s name, 千尋; significantly, 千 means “one thousand,” indicating her new role as a bathhouse worker and Yubaba stripping her of her identity.

<sup>5</sup> “Kokoro” is usually translated to “heart” in English, but the concepts do not completely correlate. Kokoro is a concept steeped in Shinto and refers to an individual’s cohesion of mind, spirit, body, and heart. Unified kokoro is necessary for proper access to Shinto, and its various elements can be honed and changed over time.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas P. Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), 50.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Clark, *Japan: A View from the Bath* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Susan J. Napier, “Matter Out of Place: Carnival, Containment, and Cultural Recovery in Miyazaki’s “Spirited Away””, *The Journal for Japanese Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 299.

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the traditional elements, reflecting the progression of modern Japanese culture. It also reflects that despite its significance to the *kami* realm, the bathhouse itself is perhaps touched by some corrupting aspects of modernity. Particularly, Yubaba's influence is one of capitalism and greed, reflected by her heavily bejewelled and decorated office at the very top of the building. The space is predominantly Shinto, but not every element of it is such; it is this impurity that Chihiro must face in the climax of her journey. By responding to the bathhouse, allowing it to change her, and then in return changing elements of that space, Chihiro engages with Shinto and comes to embody it.

Contrasting the bathhouse is the space through which Chihiro and her parents enter the *kami* realm. This area appears only briefly at the beginning and the end of the film, but it is nonetheless key to developing an understanding of Shinto space in the text. The family finds themselves lost in a forest on their way to their new home and they are confronted by a *tori* gate in front of a tunnel, guarded by a *dōsojin*, a Shinto statue that marks paths. Walking through the tunnel, they enter a train station—a place of liminality between realms—and then exit to a meadow beside what Chihiro's father identifies as an abandoned theme park. Lucy Wright and Jerry Clode suggest a significance to this detail, with both the theme park and Shinto ideas viewed as an “antiquated oddity”,<sup>9</sup> a spectacle to be considered but ultimately never revive. The journey from the mundane world into the fantastical is then taken in reverse at the end of the film when the family leaves the *kami* realm.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that the film clearly indicates that Chihiro's experience was not a mere dream: one of the final shots shows her wearing the protective hair tie made for her by her friends. This is an object directly tied to the *kami* realm, and its presence in the “real world” thus places her experience as having actually happened. Entry and exit into the spirit world and how the characters react is as significant to the movie's Shintoism as the sacred space itself.

Indeed, this is the attitude with which Chihiro approaches both the seemingly mundane, outdated Shinto elements of the “theme park” in the daytime, and the appearance of the *kami* and other extraordinary phenomena once the sun sets. There is no clear familiarity with what she encounters other than recognising the *sentō*; the space she occupies while

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<sup>9</sup> Lucy Wright and Jerry Clode, ‘The Animated Worlds of Hayao Miyazaki: Filmic Representations of Shinto’, *Metro: Media & Education Magazine* 143, no. 1 (2005): 51.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the exact same animations are used for the entry and exit, flipped on their axis for each direction.

with the *kami* is entirely new to her in every aspect. From the processing of coal in the boiler room to the *ryokan*-style baths themselves, the bathhouse rejects the modernity that has shaped Chihiro until this point. Even in the face of the impurity of Yubaba's greed and capitalism, the presence of *kami* ensures that Shinto remains the core of the bathhouse. The contradiction of the traditional as alien illustrates the marginalisation faced by Shinto customs against the modern adolescent. In order to form a more complete understanding of how Shinto constructs this space, it is necessary to build a methodology of how place is occupied.

### Aspects of Sacred Space

The idea of "sacred space" in religion has been widely discussed since Emile Durkheim proposed the theory of the separation of the sacred and the profane in the late nineteenth century. The subsequent discourse has offered innumerable interpretations of the manifestation of this separation—and indeed, arguments against its claimed pervasiveness—and yet the idea of the sacred is often taken for granted in such discussions. To avoid this, I will construct an idea of sacred space from a focus on physical place, utilising Henri Lefebvre's three aspects of social space to build an understanding which will then be narrowed to a religious context through Kim Knott's work on the location of religion. The resulting methodology will then necessitate further work, as both Lefebvre and Knott focus their efforts on Western ideas and examples of religion, which is anachronistic for the study of Shintoism.

Lefebvre's idea of social space identifies three dimensions in a given inhabited place: first, the representations of space, or the elements consciously constructed to signify purpose; second, the spatial practices, or the production and reproduction of behaviour as implied by the space and its purpose; and third, the spaces of representation, or how the space is transformed through the lived experienced that have taken place within it.<sup>11</sup> All three of these aspects must coalesce in order for a space to be an embodied whole. Constructed elements inform behavioural responses that individuals produce and reproduce, which over time constitute lived

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<sup>11</sup> Christian Schmid, 'Henri Lefebvre's Theory of the Production of Space: Towards a Three-Dimensional Dialectic', in *Space, Difference, and Everyday Life*, ed. Christian Schmid et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 28; Ceri Watkins, 'Representations of Space, Spatial Practices and Spaces of Representation: An Application of Lefebvre's Spatial Triad', *Culture and Organization* 11, no. 3 (2005): 209–210.

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experiences within the space itself.<sup>12</sup> This cohesion allows a place to act as a manifestation of a particular group or community, housing elements of their identity and providing a tangible representation of their existence. Lefebvre states,

Moreover—and more importantly—groups, classes or fractions of classes cannot constitute themselves, or recognise one another, as “subjects” unless they generate (or produce) a space. Ideas, representations or values which do not succeed in making their mark on space, and thus generating (or producing) an appropriate morphology, will lose all pith and become mere signs, resolve themselves into abstract descriptions, or mutate into fantasies.<sup>13</sup>

This idea of subjective groups that rely on generated spaces of course includes religious groups. Knott notes that in the relationship between religion and social space, the dimension of spatial practice is most significant. Indeed, she claims that religion is a consequence of spatial practice.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the idea of the sacred here is based on phenomenological behaviours within an area: the space in which an individual’s responses correlate to lived experiences of worship, ritual, and affirmations of spiritual belief and identity. Sacred space embodies an active moment of religion.<sup>15</sup> This focus is further built upon in her later work on the boundaries of religious space. The physical point at which social practice begins—and that where it subsequently ends—is as significant to spatial cohesion as the area of space itself.<sup>16</sup> Physical space acts as a container around the sacred, and the boundaries distinguish secular territories with markedly different representations of space, spatial practices, and spaces of representation.<sup>17</sup> Through comparing these dimensions in contrasting sacred and profane spaces, the aspects of each become more evident. Here it must be noted that this methodology relies on a distinct separation of sacred and profane, as per Durkheim’s original theory. This is useful in analysing Western

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<sup>12</sup> Watkins, ‘Representations of Space, Spatial Practices and Spaces of Representation: An Application of Lefebvre’s Spatial Triad,’ 212.

<sup>13</sup> Kim Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2005), 51.

<sup>14</sup> Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> Knott, *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, 28.

<sup>16</sup> Kim Knott, ‘Inside, Outside and the Space In-Between: Territories and Boundaries in the Study of Religion’, *Temenos* 44, no. 1 (2008): 45.

<sup>17</sup> Knott, ‘Inside, Outside and the Space In-Between: Territories and Boundaries in the Study of Religion,’ 45.

examples of religion, as Knott acknowledges in her work, but is perhaps less applicable when considering Eastern traditions.

One of the major issues that arises in applying Western-constructed theories of religion to Asian examples of spirituality is the anachronistic idea of “religion” itself. The concept of belief in an otherworldly power distinctly separate from everyday life is heavily biased towards Eurocentric understandings of religion, with many Asian, African, and indigenous cultures experiencing spirituality and the everyday hand-in-hand. Indeed, the concept of “religion” as separate from traditional culture was only introduced to Japan in the late nineteenth century, translated as *shuukyō*, which specifically refers to the Western model of belief.<sup>18</sup> In the instance of Shinto, there is no strict divide between the sacred and the profane; rather, Shinto is always present in every space, and it is the strength of *kami* manifestation and the ability of individuals to access it that fluctuates between experiences.<sup>19</sup> The material has a particular effect on the manifestation of *kami*.<sup>20</sup> Shrines and locations connected to purity, as well as natural spaces, have a greater *kami* presence; this combines with an individual’s *kokoro* to determine to what extent they can access Shinto in a given place and time.<sup>21</sup>

Given these differences between Western and Shinto concepts of the sacred, Lefebvre and Knott’s work must be adjusted to be appropriate to our relevant study. Knott identifies the three aspects of social space as the key development of religion and the sacred; however, as Shinto does not understand the sacred as removed from the everyday, we must instead ask how these dimensions determine access to *kami* space. For instance, representations of space involve the evocation of Shinto elements such as purification, simplicity, and natural power create a baseline for stronger *kami* presence; these are of course present in shrines, but can also be found in mundane spaces as part of more general Japanese culture.<sup>22</sup> Spatial practice can then be seen as relevant to *kokoro*: the extent to which present individuals embody harmony of heart, mind, and soul. Finally, the idea of spaces of representation allows for recursive *kami* manifestation. If a space is filled with the lived experience of *kokoro* and access to Shinto, then subsequent visitors will be more readily afforded access. In this application

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<sup>18</sup> Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home*, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Kasulis, *Shinto: The Way Home*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Sokyo Ono, *Shinto: The Kami Way* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1962), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Ono, *Shinto: The Kami Way*, 3.

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Lefebvre's methodology, it is not a matter of whether a space contains *kami*, but rather how it manifests and how it refracts human spirit back into that space. It should be noted that order of these aspects is not arbitrary. The arrangement of these aspects tracks how a space goes from being consciously constructed to contain an ideology or purpose, to intrinsically embodying its subject. Put another way, the development of social space follows time's arrow through Lefebvre's aspects. Through this tailored methodology, we can see how these aspects of *Spirited Away*'s Shinto space assists in educating Chihiro on her cultural and spiritual history. However, before we can delve into this analysis, we must develop an understanding of how Japan came to a point of producing such secular generations as that of Chihiro.

### The Secular in Japan: Policy, Not Progression

As I previously touched on, Miyazaki was motivated to make *Spirited Away* to express a concern for new generations moving further away from the Shinto practices that were so pervasive throughout the country's history. In order to fully grasp the issue of Shinto's marginalisation as reflected by *Spirited Away*, we must review the coming of modernity and secularisation to Japan; in doing so, it should be noted that Western theories of secularisation, such as that of Weber, are at best problematic when applied to the Japanese case. A brief account of Japanese history will demonstrate why this is so.

The tide of Japanese secularisation began during the Meiji period (1868-1912), following the collapse of feudal order from the preceding Tokugawa period.<sup>23</sup> Between this political overhaul and the growing threat of Western imperialism, national leaders agreed that stability could only be returned to through unification of the Japanese people, and that could be brought about through mass integration of religion into Japanese culture.<sup>24</sup> This saw a significant upheaval in the religious landscape, when the previous status quo of the coexistence of small, diverse religious groups was turned into the division of 270 political domains, each with a designated

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<sup>23</sup> Inoue Nobutaka, 'The Modern Age', in *Shinto: A Short History*, ed. Inoue Nobutaka et al. (London: Routledge, 2003), 159.

<sup>24</sup> Mark R. Mullins, 'Japanese Responses to Imperialist Secularization: The Postwar Movement to Restore Shinto in the Public Sphere', in *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West: Religion and Modernity in the Global Age*, ed. Marian Burchardt, Monika Wohirab-Sahr, and Matthias Middell (Boston: Walter de Gruyter Inc., 2015), 145.



feudal lord.<sup>25</sup> The gentry rejected adherence to any spiritual tradition other than Shinto, which was described as a natural Way that united Japan and streamlined its progress.<sup>26</sup> The idea of a Shinto path to national stability was further propagated by a revisionist view of its presence in Japanese history, emphasising and exaggerating tangible tradition over more abstract, civil presence. As the twentieth century continued and saw the advent of two world wars, Japan's government became increasingly fixated on national identity and imperial dignity, with Shinto a continuous presence in the dissemination of these emerging principles.<sup>27</sup> This lasted until 1945, when the defeat of Japan alongside the other Axis Powers saw the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers issue another upheaval of Japan's political structure.<sup>28</sup> Among many policies aiming to dispel extreme nationalism and militarisation, this included a mandated separation of religion and state, removing Shinto as a tool for national unification. Following this intervention, Shinto gradually returned to its state of civil tradition, and other religious groups were afforded free movement.<sup>29</sup> This state of affairs has generally continued up until today; as a result, it is generally agreed that Japan saw the arrival of "modernity" directly after the Second World War, and that secularisation can be tracked from then onwards.

As stated above, despite the apparent adherence of Japan to the suggested (though subsequently debunked) trend of secularisation in the twentieth century, it does not actually correspond to the ideas of Weber and his peers. While their works discuss the process as a result of individuals in modernity no longer socially needing religion, Japan's secularisation is a result of targeted, interventional policy with direct political motivations. Religion did not disappear from the public sphere, but was forcibly removed by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers. It is true that almost eighty years after the implementation, religion remains distinct from the

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<sup>25</sup> Mullins, 'Japanese Responses to Imperialist Secularization: The Postwar Movement to Restore Shinto in the Public Sphere,' 145.

<sup>26</sup> Roland Robertson, 'Globalization and Societal Modernization: A Note on Japan and Japanese Religion', *Sociological Analysis* 47, no. Supplement (1987): 37.

<sup>27</sup> Mullins, 'Japanese Responses to Imperialist Secularization: The Postwar Movement to Restore Shinto in the Public Sphere,' 145.

<sup>28</sup> Mullins, 'Japanese Responses to Imperialist Secularization: The Postwar Movement to Restore Shinto in the Public Sphere,' 147.

<sup>29</sup> Mullins, 'Japanese Responses to Imperialist Secularization: The Postwar Movement to Restore Shinto in the Public Sphere,' 148.

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Japanese state, but the beginning of this condition is in no way similar to the Western models of secularisation.

The result of this planned removal of religion from the public sphere is a lack of knowledge of tradition as Japan sees the emergence of new generations. While elements such as shrines and prayers to ancestors still pervade the cultural landscape, more nuanced understandings of rituals and the spiritual significance of even those practices that still exist are not passed down.<sup>30</sup> Industrialisation and the expansion of cities have seen the destruction of many sacred sites, and the lack of organic landscapes in these modern settings arrest connectedness with the natural world.<sup>31</sup> Those shrines that do still exist face significant economic issues: declining visitor numbers from nearby communities mean that the staff who maintain those sites can no longer afford to do so. Kenji Ishii of Kokugakuin University in Tokyo estimates that over forty per cent of all shrines in Japan face potential closure as a result of financial problems.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, Shinto priests are becoming increasingly difficult to source, with very few young people seeking training.<sup>33</sup> Secularisation began with policy, but the associated progressions of modernity provided circumstances for Shinto ideals to fall out of practice in civil contexts as well. The result of this is that recent generations have grown up with little context in which to learn core aspects of Shinto, leading to further decline in its presence.

Indeed, the parents in *Spirited Away* appear to possess little familiarity with traditional Shinto signifiers, not recognising *dōsojin* guarding the tunnel, and only providing their daughter with surface-level explanations of roadside shrines. When confronted with the spirit buffet trap, they do not hesitate to begin eating, effectively acting as representations of uncritical consumer culture. Given her parents' attitudes, it is no surprise that Chihiro also lacks knowledge of Shinto. Her inability to identify shrines, for instance, speaks volumes to her lack of exposure to tradition. Chihiro begins the film as a culmination of Japanese secularisation both mandated and generational. It is only through her subsequent, intense encounters with *kami* and the manifested spirit realm that she learns of Shinto and its core ideologies.

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<sup>30</sup> Nobutaka, 'The Modern Age,' 160.

<sup>31</sup> Nobutaka, 'The Modern Age,' 161.

<sup>32</sup> Isabel Reynolds, 'Japan's Shinto Shrines in Crisis Despite Abe Pushing Religion', *Bloomberg*, 24 May 2016, sec. Pursuits.

<sup>33</sup> Reynolds, 'Japan's Shinto Shrines in Crisis Despite Abe Pushing Religion'.

### The Bathhouse Transformed

As Chihiro's education in Shinto is facilitated by the physical space around her, it follows that each aspect of cohesive space contributes to the construction of her understanding and embodiment of the tradition. This cohesion is formed by representations of space, here the constructed signifiers of Shinto; spatial practice, or the transformation of Chihiro's *kokoro*; and spaces of representation, or Chihiro's eventual embodiment of Shinto following her spiritual journey. Keeping in mind the temporal dimension of this methodology, this structure tracks the chronological progression of Chihiro's exposure to Shinto, an experience that she can only access when intensely engaging with *kami* manifestation as it is inaccessible in her native modernity.

*Spirited Away*'s representations of Shinto space begin as Chihiro and her family first enter the forest to take a shortcut to their new home. As the car turns off, Chihiro notices some shrines on the side of the road and asks her parents about them. This simultaneous occurrence is not incidental: Shinto manifestations traditionally favour natural space, and the dense forest that they soon discover is a stark contrast to the concrete and motor vehicles that appear in the opening minutes of the film.<sup>34</sup> As the family approaches the entrance to the park, they only encounter more signifiers, such as the *torii* gate and the *dōsojin*; as I previously mentioned, they do not clearly recognise these symbols. Indeed, Chihiro is visibly frightened by the *dōsojin*. The presence of these signifiers before the tunnel implies the beginning of a container, as described by Knott. The *kami* manifestation lies at the other end of the tunnel, and by entering the family unwittingly subjects themselves to a space influenced by the Shinto imagery at the entrance, both natural and constructed. This is only heightened when Chihiro discovers the bathhouse, whose exterior shape invokes Shinto shrines. Also significant here is the presence of water both inside and outside of the structure—not only is it associated with Shinto purity, but it is also a natural element, further emphasising the depth of Shinto in the physical space. However, despite the overall strength of this *kami* manifestation, it also contains signifiers of modernity, most notably in the space occupied by Yubaba. Her office is full of ornate decorations and jewels in a stark contrast to the simplicity and naturalness inherent to Shinto. This aspect signifies that the bathhouse represents not pure Shinto but a

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<sup>34</sup> Ono, *Shinto: The Kami Way*, 27.

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Shinto that is beginning to be corrupted by modernity. While the majority of the signifiers and spatial practices remain *kami*-oriented, there is a looming threat of pollution.

Following her parents' transformation into pigs and her subsequent employment at the bathhouse, Chihiro finds herself amidst unfamiliar social practices that highlight her lack of connection with Shinto ideals. Particularly notable are her struggles with properly cleaning the bathhouse; she fails to scrub the floors with her peers, and her attempts to wash the "big tub" alongside Lin are clumsy. This is noteworthy given the significance of cleansing and purification in Shinto. Washing one's self not only signifies physical cleanliness, but also spiritual purity, and is required before one can enter a shrine or participate in rituals. Consequently, proper cleansing is essential for one to develop a good *kokoro*. Indeed, Chihiro's lack of skill in cleaning and other Shinto social practices points to the poor *kokoro* with which she begins her journey. She is not conscious of others, she lacks work ethic, and she is not at all connected to her spiritual culture. The turning point of her development is therefore her encounter with the stink spirit. Not only does it involve intense physical cleaning, but it requires Chihiro to work through a difficult situation for the good of another. Her discovery of the "thorn" in the spirit's side and her drive to remove it is unlike any characteristic she previously displayed: it is a commitment to altruistic problem solving. This directly leads to spiritual development and connection to *kami*. As she and the other bathhouse workers succeed in removing the object, it is revealed to be an old bicycle, and is immediately followed by a mass of pollutants pulled from the spirit. At last clean, it is revealed that the stink spirit is in fact a powerful river spirit whose natural form had become polluted through human waste. Before leaving, it presents Chihiro with medicine for her to use later in her journey. In this scene, Chihiro significantly embodies good *kokoro* through selflessness, determination, physical cleansing, and connectedness to the natural world. Indeed, following this encounter, Chihiro is noticeably more at home in the bathhouse and responds to subsequent events with far clearer judgment and demonstration of *kokoro* traits. By engaging with and adopting the social practices of the *kami* realm, Chihiro begins to embody Shinto, and this is subsequently refracted back into the space she occupies.

As Chihiro comes to embody Shinto, not only does she change, but so do others in the bathhouse. Most significantly, she allows Haku to access his true name and return to his full identity as the spirit of the Kohaku River; this is not only a clear connection to nature, but also to a renewed cohesion

of mind, body and spirit in the same way that Chihiro's own *kokoro* is developed. In addition to Haku, No Face finds community and peace in contrast to his lonely chaos, and Yubaba's baby rejects selfishness and deficiency to enter the world, ultimately asking his mother to let Chihiro leave. The changes brought about in these characters directly imply a change to be brought about to the bathhouse following Chihiro's departure; Haku declares he will reform Yubaba's corrupting regime of capitalism and greed, reflecting his reinvigorated Shinto back into the bathhouse. These modern presences will be eliminated and the site will return to its form as a pure space of representation of Shinto. By embodying Shinto and reflecting that manifestation back into physical space, Chihiro purifies both herself and the bathhouse, turning away from modernity and towards tradition. She has matured, and the bathhouse has consolidated its roots.

Contextualising this analysis in the broader cultural phenomenon of Japanese secularisation, the interactions of the Shinto space of the bathhouse with modernity—embodied by Yubaba and Chihiro before spatial practices begin to transform the latter—can be read as a microcosm for Shinto in contemporary Japan, and moreover a suggestion for the restoration of these traditions. A physical place that originally embodied Shinto, the bathhouse, began to be corrupted by the influence of modernity. It is only through engagement with traditional spatial practices that individuals are able to respond to these changes and return both themselves and the space they occupy to their pure forms. Of course, the marginalisation of Shinto in secular Japan is far more advanced than in the film's bathhouse; most places have become mostly secular, with only some traditional signifiers and practices remaining. The lack of cohesion between spatial elements means that these signifiers alone cannot invoke a deep *kami* manifestation, further reducing the presence of Shinto. Further, newer generations are not educated in the proper spatial practices associated with Shinto spaces, resulting in a decline of lived experience of these traditions and subsequently disallowing potentially Shinto places to refract that subjectivity to create a space of representation. Ultimately, these occurrences mean that Shinto is running out of physical dwellings in Japan, creating a vicious cycle of deterioration and disappearance from Japanese life. *Spirited Away* argues that in order to reverse this decline, young people must be given the opportunity to engage with the spatial practices associated with *kami* spaces, learning how to respond to initial Shinto signifiers and ultimately creating new lived experiences of Shinto, once again turning traditional spaces into spaces of representation.

## Conclusion

*Spirited Away* marks not only recognition of Japanese animation in the global sphere, but also a specific call for the preservation of Japanese culture and traditions within an increasingly secular state. Through placing the natively modern Chihiro in an unfamiliar Shinto place, Miyazaki demonstrates how engagement with aspects of space transform both the individual and the space they inhabit as their lived experience is refracted into the physical sphere around them. Chihiro's refined *kokoro* turns her from a sullen adolescent to a mature heroine, encouraging those she represents to similarly commit to immersion in Shinto traditions. Only through such engagement can the reality of Shinto's decline be remedied. The film ends with her leaving the *kami* space, implying that she will carry with her the newly refined *kokoro* and spread it both to her parents and to the new space she will inhabit. This reflects the fluid nature of sacred space in Shinto: it is not relegated to a specific place, but can be found everywhere and accessed through *kokoro*. As Chihiro embodies the lived experience of Shinto, she not only influences the bathhouse, but will surely turn any space she inhabits into a space of representation, drawing on remaining Shinto artefacts to invoke traditional spatial practices. In order to return Japan to its Shinto roots, those within it must commit to shaping the space through their own practice.

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*Frank R. Chappell†*

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# FORMULATING AN ‘EPIC RELIGIOSITY’: THE MAHĀBHĀRATA AND CONTEMPORARY HINDU TRADITIONS

## INTRODUCTION

The polysemous quality of the Mahābhārata has not only contributed to its timeless popularity across the globe, but also to its evolution as a religious and moral sourcebook for over a millennium. As the "fifth Veda," it continues to prove efficacious in contemporary ethical and spiritual discourses for multiple Hindu traditions in the diaspora. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the reception-history of the epic as an evolving narrative and its applicability to the formulation of contemporary Hindu ethics.

In the *Mahābhārata*, the line between literature and sacred text is blurred to the extent that separating the redacted, retrospective, and theological elements from speculative history of a people becomes nearly impossible. The Mahābhārata self-identifies as “the fifth Veda”<sup>1</sup> and as such, implies that it contains all the efficaciousness of the authoritative Vedas to materialize change in the world and cosmos. Though some would argue that this is merely a metaphorical classification, those same scholars do not deny that the epic *is* viewed as having a transcendental impact on reality and so

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† This is where you can put the author’s attributions.

<sup>1</sup> Bibek Debroy, trans., *The Mahabharata* Twenty-first Edition, Vol. I (New York: Penguin, 2015) 57. P. 156.



at least can approximate the Vedas in authority.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, such dichotomies as sacred/profane and religious/secular may be more the creation of a western Enlightenment and Protestant Reformation milieu than an emic conceptualization of texts, practices, and beliefs.<sup>3</sup> Mahābhārata scholars have also noted “the unusual role of the epic as sacred literature in the Indian tradition.”<sup>4</sup> Ramanujan echoes this sentiment and refers to extant Indian possession cults whose members, when acting out episodes of the epic, invoke the Pāṇḍavas and Draupadī during their performances.<sup>5</sup> The underlying sociological elements of the epic are that the “characters and plots are simply tools...fashioned...to serve the needs of the...narrator, the patron, and the audience.”<sup>6</sup> So too, the narration of various vignettes are interpreted by the needs, socio-economic statuses, and theological leanings of audiences seeking to understand the epic as sacred scripture. In coming to know the Mahābhārata in general and the *Bhagavad Gītā* in particular, one must become immersed in the tradition of hermeneutics seeking a reliable exegesis. Unlike Greek, Roman, and Middle Eastern epic literatures, the religious milieus of the Mahābhārata are still very much alive, making it a living text.<sup>7</sup> With these considerations in mind, the purpose of the present discussion is to contend that the epic is not simply a historical chronicle (*itihasa*), but also a resource for informing religious practice and belief. The Mahābhārata conveys not only the narrative of inter-familial warfare, but also a bounty of spiritual nourishment and truth for historical and contemporary Hindu communities. Delving first into a review of the history and context of the epic’s development and reception

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<sup>2</sup> James L. Fitzgerald, “India’s Fifth Veda: The *Mahābhārata*’s Presentation of Itself,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1991), 159-160.

<sup>3</sup> Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). See also R.N. Dandekar, “The Mahābhārata: Origin and Growth,” *University of Ceylon Review*, Vol. XII, No. 2, April 1954, 65-66.

<sup>4</sup> Romila Thapar, “The Historian and the Epic,” *Annals (B.O.R. Institute)*, Vol. LX, 1979, 213.

<sup>5</sup> Ramanujan refers to the Pāṇḍavā and Draupadī cults of Himachal Pradesh and Tamilnadu specifically in A.K. Ramanujan, “Repetitions in the Mahābhārata,” in *Essays on the Mahābhārata*, ed. Arvind Sharma (E.J. Brill: Leiden, 1991), 420.

<sup>6</sup> Madhav M. Deshpande, “Interpreting the Mahābhārata,” in *The Mahābhārata: What is not here is nowhere else (Yannehasti na Tadkvacit)*, ed. T.S. Rukmani (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2005), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Goldman also makes note of this in Robert P. Goldman, “Gods in Hiding: The Mahābhārata’s Virāṭa Parvan And The Divinity Of The Indian Epic Hero,” in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahābhārata: Prof. R.K. Sharma Felicitation Volume*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995) 77-100.

as an evolving document with layers of interpretations is necessary to flesh out this point. This article aims to discuss the place of the text in a living tradition and argues for its inclusion in the foundation for the contemporary negotiation of Hindu ethics, morality, and dharma. It concludes with an appeal for the application of the text not as a monolith with a singular interpretation, but as a living document that should be approached by both literary and social science researchers alike in terms of its negotiated meanings in Hindu traditions.

A myriad of approaches to understanding the epic employ historical-critical and anthropological methodology to contextualize the social undercurrents reflecting the birth pangs of an ancient Indian society undergoing a political transition from a clan-based pastoralist subsistence to more centralized, agricultural kingdoms. In these periods of transitions, scholars also see the interlacing and development of Bhagavatism and an emphasis on dharma in a pluralistic environment of growing post-Mauryan Buddhist/Jain heterodoxies.<sup>8</sup> Thapar notes

It was probably the immense popularity of the epic...that led to the second intention reformulation—its conversion into a Bhagavata text.<sup>9</sup>

In an effort to transform the epic into a “sectarian text,” Bhrigu or Bhargava brahmins wrote Kṛṣṇa—and Rāma in the *Rāmāyaṇa*—as avatars of Vishnu.<sup>10 11</sup> Furthermore, the increased and overwhelming theme of correct dharma related to clan, caste, and individual may indicate a historical response to the growing need of a transmission of belief in a heterodox environment containing Buddhist and Jain discourses. That is, as the text grew with time, it became a living document that embodied the events and dialogues of the period in which it developed.

The often-misunderstood recurring motif of repetitive narratives points to a greater logic at work in the epic. It is not simply a hodge-podge of mythology aggregated half-heartedly through a piecemeal method, but is evidence of a thought-out internal structure meant to create developed

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<sup>8</sup> Romila Thapar, “The epic of the Bharatas,” *Seminar 608, The Enduring Epic: a symposium on some concerns raised in The Mahabharata*, April 2010, 14-19.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>11</sup> V.S. Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998).

characters and relate theological information.<sup>12</sup> The post-Mauryan support of Buddhism and Jainism's ideology of non-violence (*ahimsa*) as it related to dharma needed to be addressed and the epic became the place to do just that.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, public criticism of ritual action as a legitimate path to Liberation by not only Jainas, Ājīvikas, and Buddhists, but also by the Upaniṣadic tradition added to the need for a rebuttal. This came in the synthesis offered by the Gītā as it joined, through Kṛṣṇa's identity and teachings, the paths of ritual action and knowledge into a singular message of detached renunciation within the context of efficacious action:

The Gītā does not reject...both action and renunciation, but rather presents a different solution. Preserving the Vedic injunction to act, while at the same time accepting the Upaniṣadic vision of the self as ultimately identical to the pure consciousness that is Ātman, Krishna informs Arjuna of a higher truth by which a person can act in the world without incurring the binding effects of action.<sup>14</sup>

This new synthesis offered a powerful and practical counterargument to that of complete renunciation in the form of the aforementioned new religious movements. Because human beings are comprised of the illusory self of the *guṇas* (the physical body, mind, and intellect, etc.), we are required to act in this reality, but by knowing our true selves (Ātman), we may alter the method and mode of our actions to not incur karma, which ultimately binds us to reincarnating in Samsara:

the question changes from whether one should act to how one should act. The choice between action and nonaction is illusory...What must be abandoned is the desire for, and attachment to, the results of action. [To perform action] purely for the sake of dharma, as a devotional offering of oneself to God [causes] actions not only to cease to produce bondage, but actually become instruments of liberation.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the brilliant and practical theology available in the narrative, some text-critical research tends to view the Gītā as *only* a later interpolation of sectarian origin that does not belong in the larger epic, while others do note that to the "native reader, it belongs incontrovertibly...it is firmly in place."<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, Deshpande

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<sup>12</sup> Ramanujan, 427; 437-439.

<sup>13</sup> Thapar, 18.

<sup>14</sup> John M. Koller, *The Indian Way* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982) 196-197.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 198; 201.

<sup>16</sup> Ramanujan, 425.

surmises that while the Mahābhārata was developed into diverse regional variations through the centuries, the Gītā remained consistent due to its elevated status as a sacred text.<sup>17 18</sup> Deshpande also draws attention to the addition of “bhakti layers” built into the Mahābhārata which support the devotional cult of Kṛṣṇa maintained in the Gītā.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, it may be that the “late-interpolation” theory of the Gītā’s timing has been nullified by its having withstood changes due to its vital importance as scripture; perhaps it seems out of place because the rest of the epic continued to evolve while the Gītā retained its integrity on account of its theological importance.

Since the early medieval period, Indian commentary traditions have regarded the epic as a *dharmaśāstra* meant to elucidate the proper means of pursuing the Good in life (espoused in the four Puruṣārthas<sup>20</sup>) and its significance as a śāstra (source of moral instruction) has been well-attested historically.<sup>21</sup> The Bhagavad Gītā especially has been taken up as a foundational text for conflicting Vedantic schools.<sup>22 23</sup> On the Vedantic appropriation of the Gītā, Robert and Sally Goldman assert

That this one, relatively small text within a text could be claimed by three such philosophically and theologically divergent—and, in fact, mutually hostile—traditions as these is perhaps the earliest indication of the extraordinary protean quality of the poem that would later puzzle, fascinate and irritate so many modern scholars.<sup>24</sup>

Multiple strains of nondual (Advaita) and dual (Dvaita) philosophies have been gleaned from the epic in general and the Gītā in particular. Both Śiva and Viṣṇu—including Kṛṣṇa as an avatar of Viṣṇu—have been suggested by commentators as being the embodiment of Brahman in disparate

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<sup>17</sup> Deshpande, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Deshpande also goes on to discuss the Gītā as equivalent to the Vedas in its status as a “pre-existing”

śruti text in the *Bhagavadgītāstuti* on pages 10 and 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Kama, Artha, Dharma, and Mokṣa* or pleasure, prosperity/economic gain, right-action, and liberation respectively.

<sup>21</sup> Fitzgerald, 162; 168-169.

<sup>22</sup> Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, “Interpretive histories,” *Seminar* 608, April 2010, 20-25. P. 20.

<sup>23</sup> C. Minkowski, “Nīlakaṇṭha’s Mahābhārata,” *Seminar* 608, *The Enduring Epic: a symposium on some concerns raised in The Mahabharata*, April 2010, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 20.

Advaitin understandings of the text for example.<sup>25</sup> Arjuna's character development is an embodiment of Vedantic traditions' emphasis on the path of knowledge (*Jñāna-yoga*), for he does not become a different character, but only shifts from ignorance to knowing the totality of truth.<sup>26</sup> Further complications arise when other avenues of thought and practice in Bhagavatism are considered; the continuum of nondual or dual "emotional devotionism" and a more strict Dvaitin *bhakti* (devotional/ritualistic) path of religious practices are also able to be deduced from interpreting the Gītā.<sup>27</sup>

As we can see from even this brief discussion of rival sectarian truth-claims to the authentic spiritual nature of the Gītā particularly and the epic *in toto*, the narratives are multivocal and may be negotiated according to one's philosophical perspective. Referring to the previous discussion of the inclusion of both the paths of action—including ritual action—and knowledge in the synthesis of the Gītā, we again find that with the Vedānta schools, an indigenous strain of inclusivism existed throughout the text that was not reliant upon British reductionist readings of "core texts" or intercultural mimesis wherein Indians and orientalist-constructs worked to create a new milieu.<sup>28</sup> The Gītā allows for a plurality of paths to the Ultimate Reality that included "[m]editative insight, discrimination, selfless action and faith in scripture."<sup>29</sup> Because the epic has been added to, and even subtracted from and "compressed"<sup>30</sup> to bring it to its contemporary form according to multiple authors adapting it to various time periods, the project to "reconstruct the meaning of the Mahābhārata 'as it was' for the period in which it was composed" seems to be a lost cause for such an massive tome.<sup>31</sup> The recovery of a singular synchronic meaning in a document whose interpretation has been continually negotiated in the matrix of culture over time is impossible without a researcher imposing their own narrative onto the creation of the

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<sup>25</sup> Minkowski, 34.

<sup>26</sup> See Ramanujan, 438, Point 7 for a succinct discussion of this concept.

<sup>27</sup> Minkowski, 35-36.

<sup>28</sup> See Richard King, *Orientalism And Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and "The Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999) pp. 118-158 for a more in-depth discussions of the creation of Neo-Hinduism and inclusivist Vedantic formulations and intercultural mimesis ala the British College at Fort William, Radhakrishnan, and Swami Vivekananda.

<sup>29</sup> Koller, 202.

<sup>30</sup> Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Minkowski, 34.

text and subjectively defining what could be the primal, original, or “most authentic” elements. As Goldman and Sutherland Goldman have pointed out in the scholarship of the epic, there seems to be “no support whatever to the claims of the scholars who held that entire Books of the poems were spurious or who argued that the divinity of Rāma and Kṛṣṇa is asserted only in a demonstrably late strata of the works.”<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere, Goldman argues that there exists no convincing textual or historical evidence for the late-interpolation theory of Vaiṣṇava religiosity.<sup>33</sup> Sukthankar as well saw no basis for the divinity of Kṛṣṇa being a later addition to the epic.<sup>34</sup> The labyrinthine “digressions” western scholars interpreted as later additions to a core text may more be more accurately described as the progression and cumulative nature of the epic as an oral performance rather than a closed textual canon that was added to over time.<sup>35</sup>

The efficaciousness of the Mahābhārata in bringing victory, the birth of a son, removing evil karma, and ultimately assisting in one’s liberation from Samsara are well attested in its pages as well as the notion that it was received by the mythical audience as a Vedic source.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the insertions of Ganesha, and especially Brāhma, from whose mouth the Vedas initially poured forth, “constitutes a powerful authoritative presence guaranteeing the transcendent value of Vyāsa’s great Bhārata.”<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt that the epic is recognized in South Asia as a religious text.<sup>38</sup> In coming to understand the traditional label of “itihasa”—often regarded as history—placed on the epic, one must take into consideration the cultural variations in using the term “truth.” As Richard King points out in an exchange between a Balinese Hindu and German writer, Bichsel, the historicity of the Rāmāyaṇa has no impact on its ability to convey spiritual or ethical truth; for the Indonesian informant, Rāma’s story is absolutely true even if it had not occurred on Earth while for Bichsel, the truth of a narrative relies upon its having occurred in

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<sup>32</sup> Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Robert P. Goldman, “Gods in Hiding: The Mahābhārata’s Virāṭa Parvan And The Divinity Of The Indian Epic Hero,” in *Modern Evaluation of the Mahābhārata: Prof. R.K. Sharma Felicitation Volume*, ed. Satya Pal Narang (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1995) 77-100.

<sup>34</sup> Goldman and Sutherland Goldman, 25.

<sup>35</sup> Goldman, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Fitzgerald, 161-164.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>38</sup> Goldman, 79.

history.<sup>39</sup> These two disparate ideas of “the truth” of a narrative should also be applied to the consideration of the Mahābhārata’s place in the genres of world literature. To a more binary western mind, the subtlety of the Mahābhārata’s conveyance of truth is reduced to nothing since it is lumped in the category of myth while for some Hindus, the status of the tale as mythology does not necessarily drive truth-claims from its purview.

It seems that in fulfilling their goals, the epic’s characters engage in sophistic justifications for their actions. Dharma is presented as subjective and malleable to individual pursuits while consistently being referred to as a longstanding, culturally-accepted standard for behavior. The Mahābhārata has been described as a text of dharmic “dissonance” wherein the correct behavioral repertoire of the characters is confused.<sup>40</sup> Is it ironic then that it should be a source of information for present day formulations of correct dharma-ethics? The application of the epic to dharmic formulations entails the assumption that the ethical framing of the characters’ storylines is shared universally by all peoples over time, however a considerable amount of “ethical revisionism” has taken place throughout the development of the text to suit various audiences in disparate historical contexts.<sup>41</sup> It is true that the Mahābhārata presents very few universal ethical and moral absolutes; dharma depends not only on caste and stage of life (*varṇa* and *āśrama*), but also gender and individual circumstances.<sup>42</sup> A deep well of behavioral recommendations from *smṛti* literature combined with *dharmaśāstras*, present multiple, and at times contradictory, sets of rules and moral proscriptions that allow for liberal navigations of what an individual should do in a particular context.<sup>43</sup> Goldman relates as well that in the “cultural tradition, explicitly codified in the *dharmaśāstras*,” there is an “indexing [of] the gravity of a crime to the relative rank of the perpetrator and victim.”<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the gravity of the crime is “regarded...in direct proportion to the status of the victim.”<sup>45</sup> Of course, one must keep in mind that the cultural context of ethical decision-making represented in Indian epic literature is one of

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<sup>39</sup> King, 39-40.

<sup>40</sup> Robert P. Goldman, “*Eṣa Dharmah Sanātanaḥ*: Shifting Moral Values and the Indian Epics,” *Relativism, Suffering And Beyond: Essays in Memory of Bimal K. Matilal*, eds. P. Bilimoria and J.N. Mohanty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) 187.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-192.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

sharp social stratification. Ethics between castes are clearly one-sided as no compensation or reconciliation is offered to such characters as Ekalavya who, striving to learn the dharma of a kṣatriya, essentially deserves to be chastised for attempting to subvert the hierarchy for his own gain.<sup>46</sup> Rather than serve as a story meant to extoll the virtues of the lower castes in pursuing excellence in various realms of achievement and the pettiness, jealousy, and rancor of the upper echelon toward the lower—this is a modern theme read into the text—it is meant to enhance the character of Drona as a truth-speaking brahmin set on fulfilling his vow to Arjuna that he would be the best archer in the world at all costs.<sup>47</sup> The lacquered-house incident where five innocent lowborn men and their mother are burned to death as the Pāṇḍavas escape through a tunnel in the floor brings no outcry of dharma-violation from the compilers of the epic in the form of narrative elaboration or from later commentaries—their social status alone is enough to warrant ill-treatment—although it bears mentioning that medieval commentators do respond to the incident as a casualty of fate (*kāla-codita*) and a sign of the degraded age (*kaliyuga*).<sup>48</sup>

Another valid point to consider when explaining the notion of dharmic dissonance is that violations of dharma by the characters invalidates them for sanctuary by dharma in particular circumstances of powerlessness or vulnerability. Karṇa's appeal to *kṣatriyadharmā* and request for a temporary pause in battle to unstick his wheel—brought on by a previous curse—at Kurukshetra does not result in Arjuna staving off an attack. On the contrary, the humiliation of Draupadī and other insults to the Pāṇḍavas are reviewed in order to justify the continuation of Arjuna's attack. Those who have already violated dharma have no right to be shielded by it.<sup>49</sup> Bhīma's infamous low-blow and trampling of Duryodhana's head is also explained in this way along with appeals to Bhīma's fulfillment of a vow and a curse, Kṛṣṇa's undying support of the Pāṇḍavas, the diminishment of dharma in the Kali Yuga, and the pragmatic need for trickery and cheating in battle to defeat such a strong opponent as Duryodhana who surely would have beaten them!<sup>50</sup> The text *must* be adaptive to particular historical circumstances in order to continue to be a valid dharmaśāstra or even a casual reference for spiritual

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 195-196.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 195-197.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 197-198.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 208-211.



guidance. There is significant difficulty in achieving theological certainty within the Mahābhārata on various conceptualizations of dharma.<sup>51</sup> Looking historically to contextualize a contemporary position of the epic in Hindu spiritual formation, we find that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century milieu of the epic's commentators, Nīlakantha, borrowing from the Mīmāṃsaka tradition, argued that the Mahābhārata belonged to the genre of remembered texts (*smṛti*) that are based on the "heard tradition" of sacred texts (*śruti*).<sup>52</sup> As such, the epic "was a reliable source of instruction [for religious behavior] for readers."<sup>53</sup> This source allowed for significant flexibility in "movements and practices" such as the interchangeability of Śiva and Viṣṇu for the nondual reality of brahman.<sup>54 55</sup> Today as well, devotees in various Hindu traditions and schools of thought maintain an encyclopedic set of historical writings, philosophical treatises, sets of religious canons, and oral traditions from which to draw upon to negotiate a cosmological worldview. The matrix of "Hindu ethics" may be gleaned from śruti which includes sacred scriptures such as the Vedas, *smṛti* or "remembered tradition," *sadachara* or regulations set by virtuous individuals—which may include the traditions of a guru—and one's own conscience and personal interpretation of dharma.<sup>56</sup> Earlier, it was noted that part of the grand theological significance of the Gītā lies in its ability to synthesize multiple traditions of belief and practice into a unique, inclusive whole. The multiplicity of options in Hindu traditions are emblematic of the Gītā's philosophical layering; "[d]evotionalism, ritual, and knowledge were being integrated into a single comprehensive way that combined the strengths of these previously separate ways of salvation."<sup>57</sup> Kṛṣṇa iterates in Chapter 9.16 and 9.23 that he is the ritual action, fire, and offering; insofar as anyone worships god in any form, they are in fact worshipping him. This remains an extant view of

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<sup>51</sup>S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, "Hindu Ethics," in *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice*, ed. Robin Rinehart (Santa Barbara, ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004), 174.

<sup>52</sup> Minkowski, 36.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, Minkowski argues that the interchangeability of various gods as primary and the inability for devotees of specific gods to see them as only manifestations of the unified Brahman or a single deity, "the one god who may legitimately be worshipped in many forms," led to the formation of neo-Hinduism beginning not in the 19<sup>th</sup>, but in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. P. 37-38.

<sup>56</sup> Rao Pappu, 155-177.

<sup>57</sup> Koller, 188.

contemporary *bhaktins* in temple communities in the United States.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary constructions of dharma tend to emphasize key concepts inspired by the Gītā as well. For example, just as Yudhishtira, responding to the Yaksha's questions, finds the supreme of dharma to be ahimsa, many practicing Hindu devotees continue to hold this view.<sup>59 60</sup> Taking shape within the context of a predominantly Protestant Christian religious milieu with an emphasis on the authority of one sacred scripture (*sola scriptura*), Hindus have elected to speak about the Bhagavad Gītā as the "Bible" of Hinduism. Though it is not the only text in a vast cultural and religious landscape, it has been critical to the formation of Hindu philosophy, spirituality, morality, and devotion. Therefore, a historical and contemporary understanding of the Gītā as a theological text shaping the religious life of Hindu groups is of vital significance to understanding its position in the Mahābhārata for devotees in living Hindu traditions.

In the present discussion, we have seen how the Mahābhārata has been understood throughout its long history. The internal structure of the Mahābhārata developed as its socio-cultural and religious significance was negotiated throughout history as a source for practical ethical guidance and appropriate dharmic paths. This also remains the case in contemporary Hindu traditions, making the epic a living document applicable as a dharmaśāstra, Advaita Vedānta, and bhakti text. The Gītā especially has been both a place of theological synthesis and a place to mete out multilayered currents of philosophy and cosmology especially pertaining to karma. Historically, it has remained consistent despite regional variations in the rest of the Mahābhārata's narrative.

Finally, the discussions above may ultimately provide a lens from which to view the trajectories of future scholarship. Present-day constructions of dharma, for example, manifest via a complex negotiation of the epic and believers' lived experience. With multiple layers in the transcendent meaning of the text in mind, it may be more fruitful for researchers to engage in inquiry on the construction of those meanings gleaned from contemporary community-based and idiosyncratic interpretations of the epic—especially the Gītā—rather than by espousing

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<sup>58</sup> Frank R. Chappell, "Negotiating Contemporary Hindu Beliefs and Practices in the United States," *Religions of South Asia*, Vol. 12.1, 2018, 88-89.

<sup>59</sup> Bibek Debroy, trans., *The Mahabharata* Twenty-first Edition, Vol. III (New York: Penguin, 2015)

594(297), 596-597.

<sup>60</sup> Chappell, 78-99.

a singular track of historical or culture-bound exegesis. The manner in which the text has been engaged with throughout history, as a polysemous and synthetic source for living cosmologies, should continue today in the discourses of Hindu traditions.

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*Taylor A Nelson †*

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## FOOD AND PURITY IN ZOROASTRIANISM: THEN TO NOW

### INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to examine the concept of purity as it relates to food in Zoroastrianism. In the past and until today, the essence of Zoroastrian religion rests on belief in an ongoing struggle between light and dark forces within each human being. Focused on “good thoughts, good words, good deeds,” Zoroastrianism has emphasized pure living, both in ancient times and today, in ways that bear upon what people eat. In terms of food, there are many examples of purity and ritual in Zoroastrianism. As one example, religious participation has required eating food cooked only by Zoroastrians. Another example is that there seems to be a demonic association with honey. On the other hand, there does not seem to be any evidence of a ban on meat or wine in religious texts. Of course, animals are of high importance to Zoroastrians, which is why some texts advise feeding animals, especially dogs, before feeding humans. Even menstruating women possess their own restrictions when it comes to food.

Through all of this, it seems that views about Zoroastrianism as a religion that must be expressed through traditional rituals continue to this today. While it may be true that various ritual practices are to be found uniquely amongst Zoroastrians, it is not necessarily true that they

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† This is where you can put the author’s attributions.

constitute the essential principles of being Zoroastrian. Indeed, in the modern age, many Zoroastrians affirm that they place greater emphasis on morality rather than specific rituals, some of which may now seem bizarre or outdated. One can see then that in ancient times, Zoroastrians othered different cultures and ethnicities for dissimilar and “impure” food practices, particularly Arabs.

Because urbanized Zoroastrians today eat food in greater quantities and of much wider variety, expectations and practices about food have changed over time in many ways. This implies that while society has changed, and food rituals have disappeared, the moral sense of being a Zoroastrian has not been compromised, and thus Zoroastrians continue in their pursuit of purity.

This study primarily draws upon a wide range of books and articles about Zoroastrianism, specifically regarding their practices of food, including translated copies of Zoroastrian religious codes from ancient Persia. This study also examines modern day Zoroastrian-style cookbooks, such as *My Bombay Kitchen* by Niloufer King. For better contextual support and comparison, it also utilizes more theoretical books regarding the relationship between food and rituals as well as the progression of food and its views over the course of history. Of course, this study would not be complete without including texts about ancient Persian and Iranian history to help explain the context of Zoroastrian history and evolution over time.

The first section of this study begins by examining the background of Zoroastrian beliefs and its history. This section will also review specific Zoroastrian terminology that will be used throughout the remainder of the study. The second section will address Zoroastrian beliefs about animals since these classifications determine the purity of certain foods. The final section focuses on examples of ancient Zoroastrian food rituals and practices and shows their transformations to the modern-day.

### **Essential Elements of Zoroastrianism**

Zoroastrianism is one of the world’s oldest surviving religions, originating in ancient Persia, and it is often suspected to be the world’ first monotheistic tradition.<sup>1</sup> Zoroastrianism gets its name from that of its Prophet Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) who probably lived in what is today

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Foltz, "Zoroastrian Attitudes toward Animals," *Society & Animals* 18, no. 4 (2010): 367.

eastern– northeastern Iran between 1700 and 1500 BCE.<sup>2</sup> The hymns attributed to him, known as the Gathas, which form the core of the Zoroastrian sacred text, the Avesta, are in an ancient East Iranian language that has been poorly understood even by Zoroastrians themselves.<sup>3</sup> Richard Foltz, in his article on Zoroastrian attitudes toward animals, summarizes the basic context of these texts:

In the Gathas, the deity of wisdom (Mazda) from the divine class known as ahuras (Sanskrit asura) is elevated to the status of supreme being, with the other ahuras as his adjuncts in the cause of good, while the daevas (Sanskrit deva), praised in the Vedas, are demoted to the status of demons in league with the evil deity Angra Mainyu (Ahriman). The two sides—originally order versus disorder but interpreted in later texts as Truth versus the lie—are engaged in an ongoing cosmic battle, in which every human being must choose a side.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the Gathas provides a basic understanding of Zoroastrianism. Most Zoroastrian texts, however, come from a much later period. In fact, they are written in Middle Persian, dating to the ninth and tenth centuries CE, during the early Islamic period.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is believed that one-third of Zoroastrian sacred literature involves law in its various forms, including the laws for food.<sup>6</sup>

During that same time period, the Zoroastrians were oppressed so severely that a large group emigrated from Khorasan area of Iran to what is now the state of Gujarat in Western India; they would later become known as the Parsis.<sup>7</sup> Thus, some of the food practices and beliefs mentioned in the study are sometimes referred to as Parsi rules, but they are still Zoroastrian if they are used in this context. It is important to know that today the Zoroastrian community is spread over the globe. The estimated worldwide Zoroastrian population according to the latest report in 2012 is about 111,201, which shows a decline of approximately 13,752

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<sup>2</sup> Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Foltz, "Zoroastrian Attitudes toward Animals," 368.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Touraj Daryaee, "Food, Purity and Pollution: Zoroastrian Views on the Eating Habits of Others," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2012): 230.

<sup>6</sup> Nezhat Safa-Isfahani, *Rivāyat-I Hēmūt-I Ašawahistān: A Study in Zoroastrian Law: Edition, Transcription, and Translation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, 1980), i.

<sup>7</sup> Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, 48.

since the previous survey in 2004.<sup>8</sup> Zoroastrians are mainly residing in Iran, Pakistan, and India (and especially Mumbai); sometimes, these Zoroastrian communities are congregated in villages, especially in Yazd, Iran.<sup>9</sup>

### **Animal Classifications and Purity in Zoroastrianism**

To provide an overview of the evolution of Zoroastrian purity and food practices from its original status to its contemporary status, it is essential to differentiate these versions of Zoroastrianism, in part by the varying religious texts produced and published in vastly different eras. It follows then that one must be careful not to project meanings from later texts onto early ones and vice versa. This study seeks to ensure this at all costs.

Of course, if one is to understand why food rituals and practices are important, one must understand their underlying meanings and causes. If one is to study food, one must understand the religious associations of animals (non-humans). After all, much of the food Zoroastrians eat comes from animals. Thus, it is necessary to start by analyzing Zoroastrian animal classifications from the onset of the religion.

Classical Zoroastrianism (from the Sasanian period, 224-751 CE) established that all living creatures originally belonged to one of two classes: they were either beneficent (relating to Ohrmazd) or they were evil (relating to Ahriman).<sup>10</sup> It seems that the basis for this distinction relies on what is useful or agreeable to human beings. Each beneficent animal must be assisted to grow to maturity; thus, it is a sin to kill it in its formative stages. On the other hand, evil animals are naturally impure and polluting, so slaughtering them is a positive virtue. These evil animals are thought to pollute the elements.<sup>11</sup> There are, however, other potential reasons why the animals are classified the way they are. This is explained in the following section.

Examples of beneficent animals include dogs, cows, horses, sheep, and goats. Of these, dogs and cows are the most respected and protected in Zoroastrianism although the dogs appear more prominently than the cow

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<sup>8</sup> Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar: Zoroastrian Survival in Contemporary Tehran* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, 50.

<sup>10</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph Over Evil* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1989), 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*



in late Zoroastrian texts. For example, some rituals require the presence of a dog, and dogs even have their own funerals.<sup>12</sup> The dog is the guard for men and sheep, thus it follows that the dog would be a beneficent animal given the theme that beneficent animals are useful to humans. Cows are also extremely important. Because cows ploughed the field and produced milk, cows are seen as beneficent animals. Killing a cow is forbidden in part because it is a beneficent animal, but also in part because it provides humans with great service and is so useful.<sup>13</sup> This, of course, implies that dogs and cows had economic benefits as well. Since dogs protected animals such as sheep, this preserved the capital of the owner. Cows, with their production of milk and plowing of the field, were a significant economic resource. Hence, one might say that economics might have had an impact on why certain animals were considered beneficent, even in more ancient times.

Examples of evil animals include ants, bees, locusts, snakes, mice, and wolves. These animals are perceived by Zoroastrians to be harmful or disgusting to humans, crops, and livestock. While beneficent animals provide economic value, evil animals hurt economic value. They are also seen as creations of evil and are therefore considered impure, noxious, and profane.<sup>14</sup> It seems that priests encouraged the killing of these harmful animals because this would be seen as a good deed and promised reward later on for Zoroastrians.<sup>15</sup> This stemmed from the belief that noxious creatures polluted the environment. Some Persians and Zoroastrians believed that individuals became impure because they had filled themselves with noxious animals.<sup>16</sup> In the famous Persian epic, the *Shahnameh*, Fereydun is instructed not to kill Zahhak by an angel.<sup>17</sup> Zoroastrians texts describe that he is instructed not to kill him because doing so would release noxious animals into the environment and pollute it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Foltz, "Zoroastrian Attitudes toward Animals," 370.

<sup>13</sup> Fahimeh Shakiba, "The Social Life of Zoroastrians in the Safavid Era 1501-1722, Based on the Accounts of Travel Memoirists, and the Influence of Religious Teachings on It," *Tarih Kültür ve Sanat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 8, no. 2 (2019): 273.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>16</sup> Touraj Daryaee, "Food, Purity and Pollution," 236.

<sup>17</sup> Firdawsī., Reuben Levy, and Amin Banani, *The Epic of the Kings: Shah-Nama the National Epic of Persia* (London: Routledge, 2011), 24.

<sup>18</sup> Touraj Daryaee, "Food, Purity and Pollution," 236.

Of course, these beliefs about animals changed over time. These rules and beliefs about killing noxious animals and preserving beneficent animals were enforced by the Zoroastrian clergy during the Sasanian period and the early centuries of Muslim rule in Iran; however, after the sixteenth century, many of these rules were not strictly followed.<sup>19</sup> Today, one can expect Zoroastrians to only follow general protocols of preventing the pollution of the earth by noxious animals because following strict Zoroastrian laws in the multireligious societies of today is quite burdensome and even impossible in certain areas. For example, while animals such as wasps, ants, beetles, were regarded as unclean in Classical Zoroastrianism, and should be killed, some Zoroastrians today actually spare small quantities of food for corn-stealing ants because they are “hard-working.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, it seems that the economic element of the ants, with their corn-stealing habits, has become a less-important factor in contemporary Zoroastrians’ perspectives about evil animals.

Likewise, cats were seen as evil animals, particularly because in the older periods they were not domesticated.<sup>21</sup> Over time, however, some Zoroastrians began to view cats in a positive light, possibly because they saw cats as agreeable and not harmful. This might also be due to the increasingly Islamic nature of Iran and because in Islam cats are viewed favorably and dogs are not, contrary to Zoroastrian beliefs. This implies much about the status of Zoroastrian beliefs of purity because as other religions invade the space that Zoroastrians practice, their customs and ideals change.

Bees are yet another example of changing Zoroastrian perception of evil animals. In the past, there was a demonic association with honey. There are three important demons in the Zoroastrian tradition and these demons are credited with giving honey to the bees, not to mention being filled with honey themselves.<sup>22</sup> Yet, over time, many Zoroastrians found the products of bees agreeable.<sup>23</sup> This is partly due to the coming of Islam and its positive view of honey.<sup>24</sup> This represents a theme that the coming

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<sup>19</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*, 15-16.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Foltz, "Zoroastrian Attitudes toward Animals," 372.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Touraj Daryaee, "Honey: A Demonic Food in Zoroastrian Iran?" *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Jagellonicae Cracoviensis* 14 (2019): 55.

<sup>23</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*, 15.

<sup>24</sup> Touraj Daryaee, "Honey: A Demonic Food in Zoroastrian Iran?" 56.

of Islam and its wide influence in Iran and the other primary areas that Zoroastrians resided significantly impacted the beliefs of Zoroastrians about animals and also food. It seems that other religions, not just Islam, used honey for food, and so Zoroastrians became exposed to it. In the medieval period, Zoroastrians finally accepted the fact that honey should be consumed, but they still relied on customary food purity laws which meant that Zoroastrians should not buy honey from a non-Zoroastrian.<sup>25</sup> This Zoroastrian law that deals with not buying food from a non-Zoroastrian will be discussed later.

One might be wondering how the classification of and beliefs about animals relates to food purity. In Zoroastrian texts, the foods which may be eaten are detailed as those which are Ohrmazdian (beneficent), while the foods which cannot be eaten are listed as those which are Ahremanian (evil).<sup>26</sup> Thus, Zoroastrians and their practices of food purity relies heavily on the classifications of animals. One typical example that illustrates this dependence on animal classifications is the perception of milk in the diet of Zoroastrians. Bruce Lincoln, writes in his article, "Of dirt, diet, and religious others: A theme in Zoroastrian thought," about the positive views of milk:

Nowhere was this goodness more evident than in the milk of these animals, which conveys the ideal, life-sustaining qualities of moisture, warmth, and light to those who consume it. Numerous texts describe milk as the best of foods, capable of fulfilling all mortal needs and one should also note that, in contrast to most other foods, milk is obtained without causing death to any plant or animal. Infants subsist on milk alone, as did the firstborn humans. Souls are greeted with milk (or butter) as they enter paradise, and when the world's perfection is restored, people will return to an all-milk diet, then renounce food altogether.<sup>27</sup>

Hence, one can see that milk maintains high status in Zoroastrianism. One can also see the relation between milk and cows, which are highly respected and admired beneficent animals. Whether milk is regarded so highly because of its production from cows, or whether cows are so highly regarded for their milk has not always been clear; however, based on

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Touraj Daryaee, "Food, Purity and Pollution," 235.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce Lincoln, "Of dirt, diet, and religious others: A theme in Zoroastrian thought," *DABIR* 1, no. 1 (2015): 45.

Bruce Lincoln's findings, it would seem that cows are venerated because of their milk production.

### **Examples of Food Rituals and their Transformations over Time**

Now that the link between animal classification and beliefs about purity in Zoroastrianism has been established, it is possible to examine specific food purity laws and rituals. The next step in analyzing food purity laws is to define exactly what food is for Zoroastrians. For Zoroastrians, the purpose of food is "to make possible the continuation of life in the face of entropy and death, insofar as food renews the body's material substance and supplies the Ohrmazdean qualities (warmth, moisture, light, etc.) on which all life depends."<sup>28</sup> In this definition, one can see that food should maintain Ohrmazdean qualities. This is consistent with the beliefs about beneficent animals since those animals have Ohrmazdean qualities. Of course, Zoroastrians believe then that one must avoid food that contains Ahrimanic qualities. Food that contains Ahrimanic qualities is destructive and must be expelled from the body by defecation before it can cause significant harm.<sup>29</sup> This is representative of a theme in Zoroastrianism that excrement and recently deceased flesh are toxic to Zoroastrians.<sup>30</sup>

Having established that excrement and dead flesh are sources of pollution, it is possible to understand why Classical Zoroastrianism requires that one not purchase or eat food prepared by non-Zoroastrians. As Jamsheed Choksy explains in his book, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph over Evil*, this ancient rule is no longer in practice today:

Because contact with non-Zoroastrians caused ritual impurity, Zoroastrians who associated with nonbelievers were required to undergo the nine-night purification. Even in 1875 CE, a Zoroastrian man and his daughter were refused entry into a fire temple in Bombay until they underwent this purification to regain purity lost through partaking of a meal cooked by a Muslim... This was, however, a rare instance in which the practice was enforced at such a late date. Indeed, this rule is no longer obeyed by anyone other than priests, who usually do not eat food prepared by non-Zoroastrians. Converts to Zoroastrianism

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 199.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

during the fourteenth to early nineteenth centuries were required to undergo this purification to attain socioritual purity prior to entering the Zoroastrian community... Zoroastrians in Iran and India who had been polluted through direct contact with carrion continued to undergo the Purification of the Nine [Days and] Nights until the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, while eating food cooked by others resulted in ritual impurity, so did contact with other non-Zoroastrians. One could expect that over time these practices would disappear given their overly impractical and strict nature. That text does not, however, explain why food prepared by others is defiling. The reason that eating food prepared by others is polluting for Zoroastrians, or at least was polluting for Zoroastrians, is that this food prepared by others is contaminated.<sup>32</sup> Non-Zoroastrians do not receive the proper training that Zoroastrians in their observance of pollution, thus the food they produce can be dangerous because a piece of their hair, a drop of their blood, a fleck of their skin, or a bit of their snot could find its way into the food, which would then pollute the food since these are all sources of pollution.<sup>33</sup>

The theme of excrement and dead flesh in Zoroastrianism resulted in another food practice that has also been “relaxed.” Those that disposed and cared for the dead, known as corpse bearers, had to abide by certain food rituals to remain pure and ensure that those around them would remain pure. For example, corpse bearers were not allowed to attend religious feasts, but today, they are allowed to attend although they are served separately from the rest of the community.<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that Parsis no longer require this separation. In fact, it is important to know that Parsis and Zoroastrians, although sharing common heritage, food, language, and religious beliefs, nevertheless maintain substantial differences, which explains why Parsis no longer require this separation of corpse bearers from traditional participants in terms of food consumption at religious feasts.<sup>35</sup> Food consumption at religious feasts was not the only issue for corpse bearers, however. Prior to the 1960s, in Iran, these corpse

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<sup>31</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 203.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>34</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*, 110.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Foltz, “Iranian Zoroastrians in Canada: Balancing Religious and Cultural Identities,” *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2009): 562.

bearers would often eat separately from their own family.<sup>36</sup> Hence, one can see that these ideals about dead flesh and pollution remained strong until the 1960s. Since corpse bearers routinely dealt with rotting flesh, they could easily be polluted and spread that pollution to other Zoroastrians. It is interesting, however, that this idea about pollution from excrement and contaminated flesh is only now evolving, unlike other Zoroastrian views about animals which changed during the coming of Islam.

It comes as no surprise that Classical Zoroastrianism would require some seemingly bizarre food practices by contemporary standards. For example, roughly during the time of the prophet Muhammad, there was a Zoroastrian practice of not speaking during meals.<sup>37</sup> Instead, it appears that Zoroastrians should mumble. The reasoning for this practice is not completely understood, yet it must be in an effort to preserve the purity of the food and reduce pollution. In any case, contemporary Zoroastrians generally do not entertain this practice. Another example of seemingly bizarre food practices that attempt to preserve purity are menstruation laws for women. These laws are also based around the theme of contamination from blood and flesh. Yet, compared to the restrictions for corpse bearers, they seem extraordinarily stringent. Zoroastrian texts describe that a menstruating woman should be thirty feet away from a sacred place and three steps from a pious man. Additionally, food should be carried to her in metallic utensils in company with a bowl of cattle urine, with which she should wash her face and hands three times, while eating the foods in a way that her hands do not come in contact with the food.<sup>38</sup>

While it is understandable that corpse bearers might pollute those around them due to their contact with the dead, among whom might be non-Zoroastrians, the stringent restrictions against menstruating women who are Zoroastrian seem severe. After all, in this case, menstruating women are still Zoroastrian. Yet, one must understand that in Zoroastrianism, blood becomes impure once it leaves the body, no matter from a Zoroastrian or not.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the flood of blood from the body is

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<sup>36</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*, 110.

<sup>37</sup> David M. Freidenreich, *Foreigners and Their Food: Constructing Otherness in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Law* (Berkeley, C.A.: University of California Press, 2011), 124.

<sup>38</sup> Nezhat Safa-Isfahani, *Rivāyat-I Hēmūt-I Ašawahistān: A Study in Zoroastrian Law: Edition, Transcription, and Translation*, 307.

<sup>39</sup> Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism*, 95.

regarded as an attack from demons on Ahura Mazda.<sup>40</sup> Thus, in this sense, blood leaving the body is vulnerable to attack by demons. One theme that emerges from this line of thought is that being a Zoroastrian does not necessarily entitle one to curtail restrictions because Zoroastrians must always strive to be pure and free from pollution.

While the imposition of new cultures can greatly influence and affect how Zoroastrians view certain foods and animals, at other times, Zoroastrians hold fast to their own ideas about food purity. For example, while Zoroastrians' view on honey changed with the influence of Islam, their view of wine has not. For Zoroastrians, good or bad nature is manifested by wine, but anyone who drinks wine should drink it in moderation since drinking in excess is considered a sin.<sup>41</sup> Zoroastrian sources describe that individuals who drink to excess will see grave health problems, suffer dishonor, and his or her soul will become unrighteous.<sup>42</sup> Yet despite these warnings of drinking in excess and pressure from the Islamic community to abstain from drinking altogether, Zoroastrians have continued to partake in the consumption of wine since ancient times, even for use in rituals.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, wine is just one example of a food or drink that has stood the test of time in Zoroastrian traditions. Along the same lines, meat is another food that Zoroastrians partake in regularly. One would think that due to the Arab invasion, Zoroastrians might have limited their pork consumption for instance, but that is not the case. In fact, it seems that Zoroastrian texts do not discuss the consumption of pork or other meats.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the consumption of meat is generally accepted among Zoroastrians. It seems that in this case, instead of the Arabs influencing the Zoroastrians, the opposite is true. Persians, some of which could have been Zoroastrian, influenced Arab cuisine in many ways, especially during the Abbasid dynasty, where various meats and organs were prepared.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>41</sup> Fahimeh Shakiba, "The Social Life of Zoroastrians in the Safavid Era," 270.

<sup>42</sup> Touraj Daryaee, "Food, Purity and Pollution," 242.

<sup>43</sup> Antonio Panaino, "Sheep, Wheat, and Wine: An Achaemenian Antecedent of the Sasanian Sacrifices Pad Ruwān," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, New Series, 19 (2005): 113.

<sup>44</sup> Fahimeh Shakiba, "The Social Life of Zoroastrians in the Safavid Era," 270.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Louis Flandrin, Massimo Montanari, Albert Sonnenfeld, and Clarissa Botsford, *Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 192.

These instances were conducted in the palace, likely where rituals and feasts held high importance.

This study would not be complete without a short discussion on the importance of these rituals in Zoroastrianism in a theoretical ritual context. While many who have followed religion have had trouble understanding the stringent restrictions that they impose, there is undoubtedly a connection between these rituals and the wholistic view of the religion.<sup>46</sup> When it comes to food, it would seem that ritual and religion are dancing partners, who move in response to each other.<sup>47</sup> Food rituals are significant events that are often sentimental, symbolizing tradition and cultural identity.<sup>48</sup> Given all this information, it appears that food rituals in Zoroastrianism are no different. Zoroastrian rituals create an alternative religious space with the distinct white vestments and melodic voices; the images, smells, and meanings of these rituals, even food rituals, have ensured that Zoroastrian traditions have not faltered, even in contemporary times.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, while there is no doubt that many of these rituals have kept the religion and its traditions alive, many of these rituals have disappeared since the beginning of Zoroastrianism. It seems that in this contemporary era, more Zoroastrians are placing emphasis on moral values and the ethical sense of being Zoroastrian, rather than adhering to the rituals themselves.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, food rituals in Zoroastrianism today are walking a fine line with tradition as more and more modern Zoroastrians discontinue them.

## Conclusion

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<sup>46</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 48.

<sup>47</sup> Katheryn C. Twiss, *The Archaeology of Food: Identity, Politics, and Ideology in the Prehistoric and Historic Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 155.

<sup>48</sup> Alice P. Julier, *Eating Together: Food, Friendship, and Inequality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 123.

<sup>49</sup> Navid Fozi, *Reclaiming the Faravahar*, 179.

<sup>50</sup> Shahin Bekhradnia, "The decline of the Zoroastrian priesthood and its effect on the Iranian Zoroastrian community in the twentieth century," *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 23, no. 1 (1992): 46.



Every religion has evolved in one aspect or another since its inception till the modern day. Zoroastrianism is no different. Every religion has rituals. Zoroastrianism is no different. Yet, in Zoroastrianism, rituals represent a significant aspect of its identity, especially when it comes to food and animals. This is not surprising since much of these rituals regard issues of purity and pollution. Other cultures and peoples have influenced these rituals over time, including the rituals surrounding corpse bearers, the consumption of honey, the feeding of ants, the keeping of cats as pets, the eating of foods prepared by non-Zoroastrians, and the restrictions of menstruating women. While these practices and rituals have changed from outside influence and increased secularization, Zoroastrian ideals and traditions have ensured that certain rituals remain. Wine remains a significant aspect of Zoroastrian ritual and is consumed in moderation. Pork and other meats are also consumed although that is due to lack of reference in Zoroastrian texts. Nevertheless, this underscores that Zoroastrian beliefs remain strong in spite of the continuing intermingling of cultures and societies.

Zoroastrianism will always be rooted in ancient traditions, but it is also rooted in moral values, evidenced by its creed of “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds” and by its distinctions of Ohrmazdean (beneficent) and Ahrimanian (evil). This implies that while lifestyle has changed over the years, and some food rituals have disappeared and been relaxed, Zoroastrians remain true to their pure nature and adherence to ethical behavior.

## Book Reviews



Blythe, Christopher. *Terrible Revolution: Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse*. Oxford University Press, 2020. 348 pp. ISBN: 0190080280.

Christopher Blythe's *Terrible Revolution: Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse* takes a deep dive into the evolution of Mormon apocalyptic thought. Moreover, this text contextualizes the Mormon apocalyptic within biblical texts as well as the contemporary realities of the official and vernacular LDS visionaries who molded it. In many ways, this text shows how apocalyptic belief helped Latter-day Saints deal with their contemporary anxieties, deal with grief and hardship, and seek retribution against their persecutors, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Blythe deeply yet concisely backgrounds the early Mormon movement, facilitating what follows for the non-expert while also exploring the nuance of the movement's formation of beliefs. He further expands the scope of the book through analysis of the American political and social climate with which Mormons have had to engage, at times in conflict and at times through assimilation.

Seeking to combine folklore, religion, and American history, Blythe successfully navigates his subjects' vernacular experience in relation to their institutional church and the U.S. government over that span of nearly 200 years. Blythe is upfront about his methods and intentions and the choices and limitations in the

structure of this work. Though not strictly chronological, the narrative weaves together the complicated dichotomy of vernacular and institutional religion, often reminding the reader—and in some cases foreshadowing—how the apocalypse was perceived. His focus on the role of the laity in the formation and development of the Mormon apocalyptic is the significant thread through this work as he used many popular sources from beginning to end. While often "official" sources make up the bulk of the citations for an academic text, the lay voices used add to the complexity of Blythe's thesis. He also does not limit himself to voices of Mormons the current mainstream church officially recognizes as members. He begins to introduce other expressions of Joseph Smith's restoration in chapter three and continues throughout. Though not as in-depth—as it would take many volumes to do so—the various groups who claim a heritage back to Joseph Smith build on Mormon apocalyptic notions from the days of the martyrdom.

If any critique of the book is necessary, perhaps the minimal conversation on "Lamanite apocalypticism" and the possible conflation of Fundamentalist Mormon understanding of the apocalyptic would be points of note. Though mentioned in passing, the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (FLDS) has a robust apocalyptic history, not to mention that of their prophets before that particular group officially adopted that name in 1991. Still, considering the depth of the first five

chapters, Blythe's inclusion of Amerindians and Fundamentalist Mormons proves foundational in the continuation of discourse on those two topics. Blythe lays a significant groundwork for further scholarship on both Fundamentalist Mormon beliefs in "the destructions" as well as how the Lamanites of the *Book of Mormon* are considered in the mainstream LDS, "prepper" LDS, and Fundamentalist Mormon apocalyptic imagination.

Blythe's critique of media coverage on Mormon apocalyptic prophecy is yet another layer full of avenues for further scholarship. As he describes the conflation of the Constitution prophecy and the White Horse prophecy during Mitt Romney's presidential campaigns, the importance of public-facing Mormon Studies scholarship, including scholars who have never been a part of any Restorationist Mormon group, seems critical. With recent events, such as the 2016 Bundys' siege at the Malheur National Wildlife Preserve, and the breaching of the U.S. Capitol in 2021, both events having men portraying the *Book of Mormon's* Captain Moroni, Blythe's contextualization of 19<sup>th</sup> century Mormon apocalyptic, its evolution, and schismatic pockets become ever more relevant to the broader discussion of American religion and its political movements.

I would highly recommend *Terrible Revolution* to all scholars of Mormon Studies. This book would also be useful in upper-level undergraduate, and certainly, graduate courses on American religion. As alluded above, graduate students who work in Mormon Studies, American religion, and various topics having to do with Parousiamania would benefit from this text as they search for ways to engage with seldom explores topics.

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